

## [\*\*Eleven, Twelve, Thirteen by orphan\\_account\*\*](#)

**Category:** IT (2017), Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** M/M, Multi, Other

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Dustin Henderson, Eddie Kaspbrak, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maturin | The Turtle, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Hanlon, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Pennywise (IT), Richie Tozier, Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer, Stanley Uris, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Mike Hanlon, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier/Stanley Uris, Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair/Dustin Henderson, Richie Tozier/Stanley Uris, Will Byers/Eleven/Mike Wheeler

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**Summary:**

In the warm orange light of his lamp, Will traces his fingers over the number inked into his skin. 013. It terrifies him and intrigues him at the same time. If she is Eleven, and Will is Thirteen - who, and where, is Twelve?

# **1. Introduction: Will Byers, Dead Boy Walking**

## **Author's Note:**

So this is my Nanowrimo 2017 entry. There's a lot of work that went into this, and a lot of sleepless nights stressing myself out of tiny plot details and stupid shit like that, and I still don't know if it works very well. Idk. Everyone is poly and everything hurts. The actual crossover stuff doesn't start until the next chapter, and even then it doesn't really pick up until chapter three, so for all you IT fans out there, just hold on!

## **Introduction: Will Byers, Dead Boy Walking**

### **January, 1984**

When Will wakes up, he feels like he is screaming, throat burning and lungs constricting, his jaw hanging open grotesquely, but... no sound comes out. Not even a whisper, a hint of a scream, just heady silence and the sense of nothing one gets when waking from a particularly realistic dream, only to discover you are still in your own bed. It's one of those nights where Will's dreams are more real than the world he wakes up in, like, deep down inside, some part of him – a real, physical part, not just his hope and light and innocence – was accidentally left behind in the Upside Down. Tonight's double feature included 'giant vine wriggling down my throat and making itself comfortable in my veins' and 'I think I actually died at one point, my heart definitely stopped beating, so why am I still in this awful, awful pain?' leaving Will lying in bed, gasping for breath with both hands pressed to his chest, and choking on a scream that refuses to come out.

It's supposed to be his first day back at school after everything, Doctor Owens deeming Will fit to be in a stressful environment like middle school again without having a complete meltdown. Will tends to disagree with that assessment, but being stuck in his house all day is getting tedious, and he wants to spend more time with his friends. His terrible night has rattled Will slightly, and that sets the mood for

the rest of his day, his mind sliding in and out of his Upside Down flashbacks all day. Breakfast is thick, sticky slime and slugs sliding down his throat, his orange juice grey and rotten in the glass on the table. Jonathan drives him to school, and every shadow that crosses his face through the windshield is the Demogorgon looming up to drag him back down, or one of the other deformed creatures come for a bite while the Demogorgon is gone. He walks up to the school building and sees vines on every surface, sees the eyes of his classmates webbed over and blank, and his locker drips with fetid water, the stringy tendrils gluing the door shut.

“Will?” Lucas’ voice breaks into his consciousness and everything snaps back to normal – no slime, no dead eyes, no monsters – so quickly Will reels back on his heels as he turns to face his friend, seeing Mike and Dustin approaching them up the hallway as well. “Will, you okay, man?” Lucas asks quietly, setting a hand tentatively on Will’s shoulder. “You mom said to call her if anything is-”

Will smiles slowly, patting the hand on his shoulder. “I’m okay,” he lies. He’s been doing that a lot lately. “Just tired, I was so nervous last night that I didn’t get much sleep.” That is a believable excuse for the faint shadows under his eyes. At that moment, Mike and Dustin are close enough for Lucas’ concerned attention to be turned on them, Lucas fussing over Mike’s red-rimmed eyes and croaky voice – he and Karen had had yet another fight about taking down the blanket fort in the Wheelers’ basement – and guilt bubbles in Will’s gut when he is glad for the distraction, knowing he’d never be able to keep up his façade against Lucas’ intensely worried stare for much longer.

“Mike, again?” Lucas sighs, not condescending, but genuinely questioning. He wraps an arm around Mike’s shoulders and the four of them start to walk towards their first class.

Trailing a little behind the others, Will can’t help the way his eyes trace over the side of Mike’s face visible to him, Mike’s lips drawn down at the corners and his cheeks that sickly shade of pale that comes after the flush from crying has faded, throwing his freckles into sharp relief. Mike’s eyelashes are still wet, and when he squeezes his eyes shut briefly, Will thinks he sees a tear fall. Will clutches his history book to his chest. He knows why Mike has been so sad – has

been told the stories of the mysterious girl with the shaved head and the psychic powers, who could flip trucks with her mind, who loved waffles, and who sacrificed herself to save her new friends from the Demogorgon – and he has his own ache of loss for Eleven, too. Will may not have known her the way the others, especially Mike, did, but sometimes, in his nightmares, she is there, holding his hand and telling him to hold on, hold on, *hold on* –

“Will!”

Startled, Will drops his book and dives after it with a squeak, scrambling on his knees and looking up at Dustin with wide eyes. He had walked straight past their classroom. A red flush rising high on his cheeks, Will gathers up the notes from Mike for the classes he had missed that were tucked in the book, and starts to get back to his feet. A hand settles between his shoulder blades and shoves downwards, and suddenly he’s winded and sprawled on the floor again, his own elbow jabbing painfully into his stomach and the hard corner of his book jabbing into his chin. “Ow,” Will whines softly, blowing his fringe out of his eyes.

Cruel laughter sounds above him, and there are more hands on him suddenly, Mike kneeling beside Will and helping him roll onto his back, brows bowed down in a furious frown. Troy is laughing his ass off a few feet away, clearly very proud of himself for pushing Will over. “Welcome back, Zombie Boy!” Troy manages to get out between chuckles. “Don’t think we’re gonna let you off just because you got lost in the woods for a week!” Troy is the only person laughing, Will notices. All the other kids in the corridor are shooting the bully looks of barely-tolerant disdain, murmuring amongst themselves. Mike’s hand curls into a fist on Will’s chest, his shoulders shaking slightly under his striped sweater, the soft wool stretched down over his fingers.

“Shut up,” Mike hisses, tilting his head back to glare at Troy so venomously Will almost doesn’t recognise his usually mild-mannered best friend. It’s a little scary, if Will is honest with himself (*not that you are particularly recognisable yourself, Byers, all grey and dead*) and he tries to tell Mike that it’s okay, he’s not hurt that badly. Mike ignores him, snapping, “Haven’t you learned your lesson, dickhead? Do you need reminding about what happened on the cliff top?”

Behind them, Dustin and Lucas suck in sharp breaths, as Mike keeps his steely expression levelled on Troy, looking for all the world like his dark brown eyes are trying to bore holes right through Troy's head. Will is confused by Mike's words. He knows that Eleven once made Troy wet himself in front of the entire school, but the others had never mentioned anything about a confrontation with Troy on a cliff top. Troy, however, seems mortified by Mike's statement, his face going white and his eyes shooting around nervously, perhaps looking for someone, and he brushes his fingers over the cast he's still wearing on his right arm, fingers scratching on the plaster. He's scrambling for a comeback, clearly completely rattled. In the end, he settles for a trite, "Shut it, Wheeler," before he sulks off, shoulders hunched and flinching at every bang of a locker door.

The mystery of the cliff top is enough to distract Will from his Upside Down flashes almost all day, even when he has a class all by himself in seventh period and the chalkboard starts to look a little cracked around the edges, the chalk dust flying from underneath the teacher's hand floating into the air and growing, growing, choking Will as he breathes it in. His eyes bug as he watches the girl beside him talk, and a slug calmly slides off her tongue and drops onto her desk with a wet squelch. Drawing is his only escape that lesson, and he fills an entire page with dirty browns and muted greens, using vibrant splashes of yellow to highlight the slug and the curve of her mouth, and thick black lines spiderweb from the spine like fingers. The bell ringing through the room sounds briefly like a saving grace, until Will remembers he has to walk out into the crowded corridor, alone, and hopes he can find his friends quickly before the darkness catches up to him. He really should give the rest of the party more credit, he thinks giddily, because there they are when he walks outside a few minutes after the rest of the class, arms wrapped around his books with his drawing sandwiched between his English notebook and his flannel shirt.

Dustin and Lucas are, predictably, arguing about something in heated voices, smacking each other's shoulders and waving their hands around ridiculously to illustrate whatever point each is trying to make. Will spares them an amused smile, happy that at least something is still normal after all this mess, and then his eyes slide automatically to Mike, who is now sporting a bruised and swollen

eye with a self-satisfied smirk on his face. “What the *hell*, Mike?” Will squawks, sprinting the few feet between them and reaching up to ever so gently touch the red and purpling skin around Mike’s left eye with his pencil-smudged fingers. “How did you manage to get a black eye between lunch and now?!”

Mike shrugs nonchalantly, actually looking quite pleased with himself and his new injury, and Dustin and Lucas cut their argument off just to start talking over each other as they regale Will with the story. “It was awesome!” Dustin exclaims, his eyes bright and his plastic teeth reflecting the fluorescent lights above him. “Mike had a bit of an issue in math, and Troy tried to corner him in the hallway when he left the room-”

“-He said he was going to pay Mike back for what El did to him!” Lucas interjects, grinning broadly. “And Mike just, like, *looked* at him, and-”

“Troy growled and punched him and Mike took it like a champ!” Dustin crows, throwing his arms in the air triumphantly. “Then Mike just shoved him to the ground and told him to leave you alone or he’d see how Troy likes wetting himself!”

Lucas elbows Dustin, wanting to get his say in. “It was totally awesome, and Troy nearly cried he was so scared.”

Rolling his eyes with a small smile, Mike says, “It wasn’t that awesome.”

Will allows himself a moment to feel all tingly inside at the idea of Mike standing up for him, specifically, before the confusion settles in. “Wait...” he says, brow furrowing. Somehow, even with the mention of Troy wetting himself, Will doesn’t think they’re talking about Troy’s little ‘accident’. “Did Eleven do something else to Troy?” he asks, both interested in hearing the story, and a little scared, because Eleven sounds like she could cause a lot of damage if she wanted to.

“Hell yeah, she did!” Dustin says enthusiastically. “She – oof!” Mike steps on his foot, and Dustin throws him a look of pure betrayal for interrupting what was about to be another epic tale of good versus Troy. “What the hell, Mike?” he whines, and Mike shoots him a

pointed look. “Ooooh,” Dustin breathes, eyes going wide before flashing Will a smile that looks more like a grimace. “Never mind.”

*Must be about the cliff top*, Will rationalises, slightly hurt that his friends are apparently keeping something from him. He shakes the hurt off, sure they have a good reason for doing so, and reminding himself that he is doing the exact same thing: keeping secrets from his friends. “Well, thanks for defending me Mike,” he murmurs, stepping a little closer so he can give Mike a one-armed hug around his books, which Mike happily returns, his forehead bumping against Will’s temple familiarly. “But you don’t have to get yourself beat up on my account.”

Mike cuffs Will’s shoulder affectionately and pulls out of the hug, shaking his head incredulously. “No one gets to talk shit about you, Byers,” he says earnestly. “Never again.” It’s a nice sentiment, but Will has noticed already that Troy’s sneered ‘Zombie Boy’ from earlier seems to have been picked up by the rest of the school, despite Troy’s apparent decrease in popularity and fear-factor since November. “Now,” Mike’s tone shifts to a lighter, more jovial sound, and he flicks his thumb over his shoulder. “These two are bowing out of ‘Help Will Study’ tonight, so it’s just gonna be you and me. Is that okay?” Mike suddenly looks a little hesitant, like Will won’t want to hang out with him without the others there. Why would Mike be worried about that?

“Of course,” Will replies, maybe a little too quick and eager, and he blushes hotly when Dustin smirks at him knowingly over Mike’s shoulder.

The Wheeler’s basement is a nice, warm change from the frigid breeze outside – it may be nearing the end of January, but the weather is still acting like it’s the middle of December, and Will is pretty sure there’s snow in the air – and he throws himself onto the couch with a little more force than necessary, burrowing into the quilt thrown haphazardly over the cushions with a contented murmur. This is the warmest he has been all day, and Will is finding it harder and harder to keep warm as they days trot on, constantly wrapping himself in layers and layers of clothing, always needing at least one extra jacket when he leaves the house. There’s a faint giggle from somewhere near the stairs, and Will peeks out of his quilt

cocoon to narrow his eyes at Mike, the taller boy flitting around straightening their Dungeons and Dragons table so that it's ready for the weekend (*this campaign is going to be great, Mike has been planning it for a week and he swears it will have a more satisfactory ending and less plot holes than the last few*) and emptying his bag onto the floor to shuffle through a pile of paper for the notes he needs to give Will. "You laughing at me, Wheeler?" Will asks, pretending to sulk.

"Never, Byers," Mike says, definitely laughing quietly from his spot on the floor. "Does the caterpillar want to join the rest of us on the ground so we can go over two weeks of math notes from last term?"

Groaning under his breath at the mention of his least favourite subject, Will slides off the couch with the quilt still draped around him, and crawls over to sprawl at Mike's side, extracting a hand to pick up some of the notes. He wrinkles his nose. "Your handwriting is still terrible," he informs Mike, because Will is a good friend (*just a friend, always just a friend*) and Mike deserves to know that he writes like a drunk chicken. "It really, truly is a travesty." Will sighs theatrically. "And Nancy's handwriting is so beautiful..."

Mike grins and knocks his elbow against Will's shoulder. "Shut up, Byers, we can't all have flawless cursive," he laughs, and Will has to duck his head to hide a faint blush at that statement.

Pawing over notes in the Wheelers' basement and bantering with Mike almost makes Will feel normal, like everything that happened was the nightmare, and his actual nightmares are just bad dreams, and like maybe he can move on from it. They work through three pages of Mike's notes, talking quietly as Mike explains the formulas Will missed suffering through in class, and Will tries not to stare at Mike's pretty freckles too obviously. When they get to the eleventh problem on the page, Will sees Mike's fingers start to tremble a little, his face dropping slightly, and he keeps licking his lips like he wants to say something but doesn't know how. Will knows how Mike feels about the absent girl who saved them all (*he's not even jealous, that isn't an emotion in Will Byers' repertoire*) and his own heart aches for Mike's pain. He shuffles closer and hugs his friend, sits his chin on Mike's shoulder, and Mike nuzzles his nose into Will's hair as a small shudder rolls through him. They both look over to the small blanket fort still set up reverently in the corner. Mike's Supercomm is resting

proudly in the centre of the pillow pile, and Will feels something heavy settle in his stomach at the thought of Mike sitting in there, desperately calling out for someone who never answers.

*(He called for you in the Upside Down and you never answered, and now he's calling for the girl who gave herself up to save you, and she can't answer either, and it's all your fault...)*

The question slips out without Will even noticing. "Mike, what happened on the cliff top?" Will doesn't realise he has even said anything until he feels Mike stiffen beside him. Glancing up at Mike, Will watches a range of emotions flicker over Mike's face, amplified by the high cheekbones and dark, soulful eyes. Fright. Guilt. Anger. Shame. Sadness. "Mike?" Will whispers, concerned.

Mike breathes out slowly, until his throat whistles and spots of pink appear on the apples of his cheeks. His black eye is dark purple now, red veining out over his eyelid and the bridge of his nose, and Will knows it will be turning green and yellow by the end of the week. He almost wants to draw it, capture the colour progression forever, stark against Mike's pale skin. "We were looking for El," Mike says, voice thick. His eyes are closed now, because he knows that if he looks at anything – at Will and his big, green eyes, at the blanket fort with all its memories, or at anything else in the basement – he will start crying, *again*, and probably won't stop until he can't breathe and Nancy has to come and talk him back into calmness. "And we were up near Hawkins Falls, me and Dustin. That's when Troy and James found us." Mike can hear Will's mouth pop open in shock. "Troy wanted revenge for El making him piss himself. He had a knife."

A shocked gasp escapes Will, and he listens with rapt and horrified attention as Mike tells him about Troy holding Dustin at knifepoint and forcing Mike to jump off the cliff, and how Eleven had showed up just in time to pull Mike back over the edge, breaking Troy's arm to scare him away. Mike could have died, *would have died*, if Eleven hadn't been there. Will can see it so clearly in his mind's eye it makes him sick to the core: Mike's thin, lanky body smacking into the water's surface and sinking to the bottom of the lake, never to be seen again until it washed up into the same quarry that Will's fake body had been found in. Only, this time, it would be real, no matter how much Will screamed Mike's name. He can understand why his

friends didn't want to tell him that particular anecdote about their adventures with Eleven, (*it's all your fault, it's all your fault, it's all your fault*) Mike would never have been in that situation if Will had defended himself better, had been stronger, had tried harder to get himself out of the Upside Down, had been able to put it all on the line for his friends (*just like Eleven did, in the end*).

Will spirals. He can hear Mike calling his name, can vaguely feel Mike tugging the quilt off him and trying to get him to respond, but Will can't move. He can't see, and he blacks out, right there in Mike's basement. Suddenly, he's back in the Upside Down. It's his nightmare all over again. No matter how hard he screams, sound refuses to come out.

When he finally comes out of it, when he 'wakes up' from the living nightmare, Will is propped up in the bed in Hawkins Laboratory that he has become all too familiar with, his head hooked up to so many beeping machines he tears up in pain, the sounds piercing in his skull. Doctor Owens calls it 'an episode', says Will, quite probably, will have several more in the following months as he processes his trauma.

Will tips his head down onto his mother's shoulder at the news, and cries in her arms.

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### March, 1984

They all learn to tell the time by Mike's obsessive and depressive count of how many days that Eleven has been missing. He never says it outright, but they know he tries to call her on his Supercomm sometimes, hoping that maybe one day, he'll get an answer. Will half expects Lucas to call Mike out for it, and tell him he's being ridiculous – their arguments can flare up over the smallest thing lately, both of them emotionally compromised – and then Will berates himself for thinking so lowly of Lucas, who is hurting and missing Eleven too, blaming himself for not being able to defend his friends against the Demogorgon better. They all have their own way of counting the days. Will counts how many days it has been since he returned, how many days it has been since the life he had known

before ended.

On day seventy-six, Will goes to bed as he does every night, hesitant and fearful of his own mattress, afraid that at any moment, the sheets – with their innocent Pac Man pattern and soft cotton finish – will turn into strangling fleshy vines and monster teeth to drag him back underground. He pulls his blankets up to his chin, rough wool scraping his neck, and then right up over his head as an afterthought, closing his eyes in the darkness in an effort to slow the rapid pounding of his heart as he wishes he had taken up Dustin's offer to stay the night, rather than insisting his friend biked home before it got dark (*so that Dustin didn't have to put up with all of Will's night time issues*) and sleep in his own bed rather than on Will's uncomfortable floor. Quietly, the record player is spinning in the background, something guitar-heavy and lifted from Jonathan's collection, and Will thinks he should have turned it up before he got into bed. Maybe the loud music would drown out his racing thoughts and bury tonight's up and coming nightmare that Will can already sense lurking in the back of his mind. But, now that he is in bed, he doesn't want to get out, terrified that when he puts his feet down, he will feel leaves and decay instead of carpet and dirty clothes.

*Zing.*

Will jerks at the strange sensation, warmth shooting through his veins, and then the music starts to swell in volume, Will's heart skipping a beat in time with the drums, and he throws the covers off to see who could possibly be touching his player. He freezes, almost blinded by every single light in the room shining back at him – the lights that were off when he crawled into bed. The harder his heart beats, hammering against his ribs like it wants to hop right out and run away, the brighter the lights glow, until Will thinks the bulbs might just explode and shower him with paper-thin glass. His eyes dart around the room, but there is no one in sight.

Panting, Will flops back against the mattress, pressing his spine in to ground himself, and wills himself to calm down and go to sleep. Mike is tearing himself apart worrying about Eleven, and Will's general health and happiness, completely forgetting to look after himself in the process, and Will doesn't want to make it worse – Mike has been looking distressingly frayed around the edges lately, like if someone

pulls one of his threads, he will fall apart completely – doesn't want to make Mike any less happy. Any less like Mike than he already is. Will closes his eyes against the still-shining lights, ignoring the red glow behind his eyelids and eventually drifting off to sleep with strange images of Mike and Eleven circling around in his head.

Jonathan is making breakfast in the morning, as usual – eggs and pancakes today, with an extra portion he hopes his mother doesn't notice, something special because he had woken up earlier than normal – when he hears Joyce shriek Will's name, the sound ripping from the middle of her diaphragm and stabbing Jonathan in the heart. It's the most tormenting sense of *déjà vu*, and Jonathan forgets about going back to bed when breakfast is ready, nearly putting his entire hand in the hot skillet as he scrambles to get to his mother, calling out to her frantically around the burnt fingertips he has shoved in his mouth. "Mom?!" He careens around the corner from the hall and into Will's bedroom, skidding to a halt seconds away from crashing into Joyce's back where the woman is standing still as a statue in the doorway, her hands pressed to her cheeks like a Munch painting. Jonathan moves her aside with soft hands on her shoulders, and steps inside the room.

The first thing that hits him is the god-awful scent of burning plastic, his eyes immediately drawn to Will's prized record player. The platter is cracked in half and the slip mat burnt to a lump of splintered rubber, and the arm and needle have been blown off completely, faint tendrils of smoke rising out of the speakers. Black goo is dripping down onto the carpet in thick dollops, and the only reason Jonathan even realises that it's the remains of one of his Echo and the Bunnymen records is the paper label he sees still clinging to the spindle, curled and singed at the edges. Choking on a scream, Jonathan's wide eyes trail the puddle of melted vinyl to the rest of the floor, glittering in the sunlight from the open window with thousands of shards of glass, thin and tiny and absolutely everywhere. And, the worst thing of all, is that Will is nowhere to be seen, a trail of small, bloodied footprints crushing the glass further into the carpet leading from the side of his bed to the window, more red streaking the white frame and disappearing over the veranda, out into the back yard.

Wearing nothing but a ratty pair of sleep shorts, a stretched-out Bowie shirt, and fluffy, mismatched socks that possibly belong to Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan leaps across the room, out the window, and after the trail of footprints before Joyce can even utter another scream of her youngest child's name. Joyce is in such a state of shock she doesn't notice Steve Harrington, of all people, sneak out the back door from Jonathan's bedroom – barely dressed himself and looking mildly perturbed – get in his car, and chase Jonathan down before he gets seen in such a state. He brings the distraught boy back to the house and whips the burning food off the stove before the pan becomes unsalvageable, both Jonathan and Steve acting like Steve hadn't been there all morning, and most of the night, already. Both Byers are utterly beside themselves, so Steve closes Will's door carefully and makes them sit down in the living room, his own worry barely held under a practised schooled-face of 'gotta keep calm, gotta keep calm' as he calls Hopper, and then the Wheelers, feeling that the entire group should know. Nancy promises to tell Mike, who Steve can hear in the background frantically asking his sister what's wrong with Will, before she hangs up with a soft, 'See you soon, Stevie.'

"Steve?" Joyce finally notices him, blinking her eyes for what feels like the first time since she pushed Will's door open that morning. "What are you doing here?" Jonathan and Steve share an awkward look over Joyce's head that feels hilariously out of place, given the current situation, but are saved from answering by the sound of approaching police sirens. "Hop!" Joyce nearly wails when the police chief throws the door open, and the Byers' living room becomes one big, half-dressed Find Will party, Hopper having only thrown on sweat pants and his jacket before leaving his house.

When Mike thinks back on the week that follows, many years later when the idea of Will disappearing doesn't make his entire body ice over and his heart thud audibly, he can only remember snaps of it, like someone had given him a View Finder and a disc of pictures. He can see himself and Nancy speeding to the Byers' house, almost hitting Lucas and Dustin, headed in the same direction on their bikes. He sees them all splitting into groups – adults, teenagers, and kids – and going out all day looking for Will, because it doesn't take them long to realise that Will hasn't been taken this time (*not at first, not yet*) he has actually gotten up and walked away, apparently of his

own accord. Mike will remember someone – who, specifically, he never knew – bringing up the phrase ‘sleep walking’, and he will remember spending two entire days combing every inch of the wooded area surrounding Hawkins, searching and calling desperately for Will. It hurts. Mike will clearly remember spending the week feeling like someone punched him in the stomach, kicked him in the chest, and then bashed his head into a wall. He barely manages to get through his nightly calls to Eleven over his Supercomm.

He calls her bawling the first night Will was gone, and he could have sworn he felt someone touching his back, but he knows that was just a cruel joke in the form of wishful thinking. Eleven wasn’t there, but he knows that if she was still there with them, she would have been able to find Will for them. She did it once, and Mike knows that she can do it again.

The third day will stand out more clearly than the others, when Mike remembers it.

At dawn, after the entire house had crashed into sleep, exhausted from forty-eight hours of fruitless searching, Mike groggily pulls himself out of the makeshift bed he had constructed for himself on the freshly-vacuumed floor of Will’s room, ready to make his way either to the bathroom or outside to scream, and immediately trips over Dustin. The sudden change of direction sends his not-quite-awake-yet body tumbling onto Will’s bed, which no one has dared touch since Joyce discovered Will missing except to clean the glass off. His hip knocks against the post at the end, and Mike lies there groaning sleepily in pain for a minute before Lucas grumbles at him to shut up, one dark hand emerging from the pile of blankets Lucas is half-sharing with, half-fighting Dustin for, swatting at Mike’s ankle. Mike grunts and shuffles away from the assault, pulling himself further onto Will’s bed, misjudging the width of the mattress and over-balancing his lanky body, tipping himself off the other side of the bed, and the floor is suddenly rushing up to say hello to his face.

“Ow,” Mike whines, cheek smashed into the carpet and too tired to move much, trying to ignore his screaming bladder. He brings a hand down to try and lever himself back onto the bed, and he puts it on a wad of paper sticking out from under the blanket that had been haphazardly thrown off the side of the bed. Random pens and papers

on Will Byers' bedroom floor wasn't that unusual (*why does Mike know what the common state of Will's room is?*) because Will had been drawing more and more lately, his art one of his only escapes from the trauma Mike knows his friend has been trying to hide from them. But there are words on these pages, big, bold, scrawled words that seem to be yelling, 'look at me! here I am! what took you so long to notice me!' at Mike. He fumbles, tries to pull the paper out while his hand is still on top of it, and it rips in half while Mike somersaults off the bed inelegantly, landing on his back with a gasp and a thud that has Dustin and Lucas scrambling out of the one blanket they've ended up wrapped in.

"Mike!" Dustin whispers, annoyed at being woken up so early, crawling around the bed to find Mike. "What the hell?"

Moaning, Mike lets Lucas help him into a sitting position, and then he extracts the two halves of the papers, and a few others he spots with the same writing on them. "Guys, look," he breathes, laying the ripped page out before the three of them. "I think Will did these before he left."

"How could you possibly know that?" Lucas slurs, head leaning heavily on Mike's shoulder tiredly.

Dustin reaches around Mike to thump Lucas as Mike tosses Lucas a reproachful glare, his sleep-soft cheeks going slightly pink. He really doesn't want to explain that he knows these are new because he has every inch of Will's room memorised for some strange reason that Mike isn't fully prepared to internally explore at the moment. "Shut up," Dustin says smartly, saving Mike the trouble.

Not in the mood to put up with one of their stupid play-fights this early in the morning, and after so little sleep and too much worrying, Mike talks loudly in the hopes that they'll listen to him without question. "Just look at these. Look at what they say."

The ripped page, held lightly together by Mike's fingers, and all the other pieces of paper below it in the stack, are covered in thick purple words – the purple marker lying a few feet away from the bed, its nib smashed to a fluffy nub – running together and overlapping. Some pages are almost a solid block of purple ink, the three boys

squinting to make out the words.

TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT. TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT. TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT.

Over and over, the six words repeat, Mike flipping the pages as their confused frowns get more pronounced. At some point, the purple marker must have died, and the pages start sporting bright orange words, Lucas unearthing an equally destroyed orange highlighter, its casing warped, from under Will's nightstand. "The words are different," Dustin breathes, touching the first page with orange on it with a shaking hand. "Look, the purple stops and the words change."

TREE. DOOR. PHONE. SHED. GUN. LIGHT. DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD.

Mike flips through the orange pages, eyes catching repeatedly on one particular word.

DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD. DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD. DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD. DARK. SCARED. RUN. HIDE. MOM. CASTLE. ELEVEN. MONSTER. DEAD.

"What does it mean?" Mike asks, feeling tears well up in his eyes at the thought of what could have possibly been going through Will's head at the time to prompt him to write these things. "Eleven"? Why does it say 'dead'?"

Dustin shakes his head emphatically. "I don't know, I do not know."

Lurching forwards, Lucas gathers up all the papers, trying not to scrunch them too badly. "We have to show the others, maybe Jonathan or Mrs Byers will know what it is." He rubs the back of his head worriedly. "Maybe it's something he's talked about with Doctor Owens?"

Joyce and Hopper are smoking at the kitchen table, giant mugs of untouched and stone-cold coffee in front of them, at half five in the

morning when the three youngest occupants of the house burst out of Will's room in a tangled mess of jumbled words and too much energy, considering Hopper and Steve had had to carry Dustin and Mike inside the night before, Lucas tripping and trailing behind Nancy as she made her way into Jonathan's room. Hopper barely represses a groan and stubs out his smoke in the ashtray by his elbow, wincing when he takes a gulp of his coffee and the horribly cold liquid splashes over his tongue. The three boys roll to a stop right beside the adults, papers and blankets wafting off them like shed skin. Someone is saying, 'Look at what we found,' and someone else is saying, 'Does this mean anything to you?' and it's too much sound, Joyce reeling back in her chair as Hopper raises his hands in defence against the barrage of sound.

"One at a time!" Hopper says sharply, almost cracking a smile at the repetition of history, but now is definitely not the time for humour. "One. At. A. Time." He doesn't even have to point at Mike this time to prompt the boy into speaking. He quickly explains about the papers with minimal interruptions from the other two, and then holds up a few sheets to show the adults. Hopper shakes his head; he has never seen or heard anything like what is splashed across the papers; but Joyce has that look on her face like she's had an epiphany. "Joyce?" he murmurs, putting his hand on her knee to get her attention.

She jumps, that startled-rabbit look settling back into her features like it never left all those months ago, and her hands scramble for the pages, cigarette sticking out between two fingers. Hopper is a little afraid she might set the paper on fire as she closes her hands around them, pulling them in close and staring at Will's crazy scrawl with wide eyes, her mouth working silently, as if she wants to say something but the words refuse to come out. "This is the night Will was taken," she gets out eventually, showing them an all-purple page. "He told me that nearly ran into a tree on his bike before he reached the house, the Demogorgon unlocked the door from the outside, and he tried to ring for help on the phone. But, when no one answered, he hid in the shed, and tried to use the gun to defend himself." Joyce gulps, eyes flicking around nervously as she points at one of the 'LIGHTS' on the page. "He told Doctor Owens that right before it took him, the light in the shed glowed so bright he thought it had blinded

him.”

Mike lets out a sob-like sound, trying to smother it in the sleeve of his jumper. His big brown eyes are swimming with pain, and Dustin and Lucas don’t look any better. “What about the other words?” Lucas asks, putting his arm around Mike’s shoulders comfortingly. “The orange ones?”

“I don’t know,” Joyce stammers, tears starting to brim in her own eyes. “But maybe it’s something he told Doctor Owens?” She turns her gaze to Hopper as she says it, suddenly questioning. “Maybe we should...?”

He’s nodding before she has even finished speaking. “We’ll go up there today, the kids can keep looking up by the quarry, we didn’t get there yesterday.”

Plan of action decided, Mike gets sent into Jonathan’s room to wake the three teens as Dustin helps make breakfast and Lucas goes poking through Will’s room in case any more clues to the missing boy’s whereabouts unearth themselves. Tugging his blanket around his shoulders, Mike shuffles up the hall and knocks on Jonathan’s door, pushing it open with his toe when he gets no answer other than a muffled snore. He pauses on the threshold, blinking at the sight of Steve spread horizontally across the floor at the foot of Jonathan’s bed, pillows and blankets tucked around him as a makeshift palette, contentedly snoring away. Jonathan and Nancy are on the floor too, Jonathan’s head on Steve’s stomach where he’s lying half-curled on his side, Nancy wedged into the gap between them, her forehead pressed to Jonathan’s and her hands fisted in the hem of Steve’s shirt. Mike wrinkles his nose (*why are you making that face when you’ve had a dream just like that with two other people?*) and raps his knuckles on the wall obnoxiously until Jonathan jolts awake so suddenly he inadvertently wakes the other two up as well. “Quit being gross and come help us find Will,” Mike mutters, rolling his eyes, because he’s the little brother and it’s in his job description to be disgusted by his sister’s boyfriend. Boyfriends? Whatever. People she’s non-platonically cuddling with on the floor.

Mike battles off an unwanted bout of jealousy all the way back into the kitchen.

His memories of that week peter out again after that. They found nothing else that day, nor the day after, and Joyce and Hopper returned from Hawkins Laboratory frustrated and empty handed. “They know something,” Hopper keeps insisting, smoking his way through an entire pack of cigarettes by the end of the fifth day. He bangs his fist on the table suddenly, and everyone in the room jumps. “I know they know where he is!” And so Hopper leaves again, headed back for the Lab, and Mike continues to quietly fall apart, still venturing out with Dustin and Lucas and their bikes in the hopes that they might just stumble across Will in the woods. Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan take Steve’s car all the way out to the town limits, just in case, returning with a worried-to-tears Jonathan and no Will.

Day six is nothing more than a blank slate with the words, ‘Will, where are you?’ scratched on it. Mike knows he called Eleven at the end of each previous day, but he doesn’t recall doing it, what he did, or said to her beyond the count of the day and muffled sobs of Will’s name. At the end of the sixth day, still stuck on square one and a half, the eight of them retire to bed. Dustin and Lucas had already fallen asleep on the Byers’ couch, much to Hopper’s dismay at losing his bed for the last five nights (*Joyce takes pity on him and lets him sleep on her floor*), so Mike creeps into Will’s room alone, makes his call to Eleven from the floor because he still doesn’t feel right sleeping on Will’s bed, and wraps himself up in one of Will’s blankets as he drifts off.

In the middle of the night, when Mike is caught in a dreamless sleep, the window slides open, small feet appearing on the sill. Said feet shuffling across the floor rouse Mike, and he blinks blearily in the darkness, a shadow moving across the room and climbing into Will’s bed. Mike tries to speak, but his throat won’t work, and he fights his blanket to stand, tripping and stumbling to the bookshelf where Mike’s torch is lying in a manoeuvre that takes him several minutes longer than it should have. He fumbles to turn it one and shine the beam around the room. A whinge of complaint is emitted from the bundle of covers that has made itself comfortable in Will’s bed when the light lands on it, dirt-covered hands poking out as if trying to wave the torch beam away, and Mike thinks he might have died and gone to heaven when Will Byers’ head appears out of the quilt.

“Mike?” Will croaks, rubbing at his eyes. His hair is wild, leaves and twigs sticking out of the tangled mess like an earthy crown. “What are you doing in my room? It’s late.” Mike still can’t get words out. Will has dirt streaked all down his face and neck. “Did Dustin tell you I was here by myself? Because you guys know that I can make it through a night on my own, right? I’m not going to break if you – Mike?” He’s staring at Mike with confusion shining in his green eyes. “Mike, are you okay?”

The torch clatters to the floor, and Mike shrieks loudly, unable to control his voice. He claps his hands over his mouth and drops to his knees, staring at Will with huge eyes. Mike doesn’t even know when he starts crying, but suddenly his face is wet with hot, salty tears.

Will is back, and he doesn’t even realise that he’s been missing.

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### October, 1984

Lips still tingling from where they had pressed against Mike’s cheek, Will walks out of the Wheelers’ house and hops onto his bike with steely determination, peddling down the road and back towards his house. He knows his mother will kill him when she finds out he left the house he was supposed to be sleeping at, by himself, in the middle of the night. Skirting Mirkwood (*Doctor Owens thinks that Will should try riding Mirkwood again, but that is never going to happen*) and taking the new route he had come up with – which is lined by large redwoods, so he is tentatively nick-naming it Endor – he rides right past his house, slowing down and ducking his head to avoid being seen by Steve and Nancy, cuddled together on the porch swing as Jonathan snaps some pictures of them, and starts heading down the familiar track to Castle Byers. He can’t stand seeing Mike so depressed and out of it anymore – Will has to do something about it. That last call to Eleven had been so painful for Will to witness (*he can’t imagine how Eleven must have felt, knowing that she was watching, listening*), Mike silently falling apart from the inside as he called out to the girl he misses so sorely, and Will wishes that he had never agreed to spend the night at Mike’s.

He stops and leans his bike against the side of the little hut, crawling

under the sheet door and fumbling around in the dark for the box of matches so he can light the small lamp he has stashed away in Castle Byers. Will carefully carries the lamp over to the palette of blankets and pillows, sitting down and placing it at his feet – he needs to be alone for this idea to work, he won't be able to concentrate with Mike sitting *right there*, those beautiful brown eyes focused solely on Will.

Having heard every single detail of Eleven's week with Mike and his other friends – Dustin had gladly filled in the gaps after Will's episode over the clifftop story, tired of hiding things from the boy – Will knows of one guaranteed way of finding Eleven. He has to find his way into the *mind place*, that's what Eleven had called it. With a salt bath out of the question, Will so terrified of suffocation he doesn't think he'll ever be able to get into a normal bath ever again, let alone a salt bath he has to completely submerge himself in, he has been trying to figure out a way of accessing that silent, endless plain of darkness and black water again. If Will is being honest with himself, he wants to find Eleven for more than just salvaging whatever shreds of Mike's happiness still remain.

He wants answers.

Without even thinking about it, Will rolls up his left sleeve. He's been wearing long sleeves every waking moment now since March, finding excuse after excuse – particularly hard during the summer months, but he managed it – to never expose his arms to anyone. Everyone worries over him so much that Will couldn't possibly bare to burden them anymore, and so he has been content to keep this secret until he finds the one person who would understand, would know what to do about his... *situation*.

Will scratches idly at his left arm, eyes flicking down to his biggest secret.

He told everyone – his mom, Jonathan, Doctor Owens, Mike – that he didn't remember a thing from that week in March when he went missing. And that is partially true. He remembers Eleven, seeing her in that place he is almost convinced that he made up, but is now trying to reach, but Will has no memory of writing all those pages of words, leaving his room, or climbing back through the window, just

of all his electronics going haywire right before the lights exploded, and of waking up to an emotionally wrecked Mike crouched on his floor like a wounded dog.

He has a vague recollection of the woods, his feet stinging on the twigs and leaves as he walked somewhere, like it happened to someone else, not to him, and she just heard the story about it. He remembers the bright lights of the lab, the electrical buzzing all around him. The pain in his arm, never mind its briefness, stands out at the clearest memory from the entire night, and he brushes his fingers over that spot now. Will can recall blurry flashes of machinery and needle pokes and a warm *zing* in his entire body immediately followed by all the lights flashing and the annoying machines bursting into flames. And then... the cool slide of his sheets and the familiar softness of his mattress.

In the warm orange light of his lamp, Will traces his fingers over the number inked into his skin. 013. It terrifies him and intrigues him at the same time.

Allowing himself a moment of reflection (*if she is Eleven, and he is Thirteen, who and where is Twelve?*) Will shakes himself and sets about putting his, admittedly, shaky plan into action. He needs to render himself senseless in a way that won't send him spiralling into a panic attack in a place so isolated and far away from someone who could help pull him out of it. He has a pair of Jonathan's old headphones, the padded muffs sufficiently cutting sound off once Will has adjusted the head band, and he finds a scarf mixed in with his blankets, tying it around his eyes before lying down, careful not to kick his lamp over.

The sensation is almost relaxing, not being able to see or hear as Will sinks into the meagre warmth of his blankets and the big, soft jacket he's wearing. He empties his mind as much as he possibly can, fighting back the fear and the memories and the trauma, and he focuses on *her*. The girl he has only met twice, and never when the two are in the same reality. He pictures her shaggy hair and soulful eyes and her small, warm hands, strong and offering him unselfish comfort in his darkest hour. "Where are you, Eleven?" he whispers to no one, squeezing his eyes shut against his makeshift blindfold in the hopes that will help.

Minutes later, when he opens his eyes, Will is surrounded by calm, still blackness, cold water pooling around his ankles as he stands in the *mind place*. He gasps, stumbling a few steps backwards. “Oh my god, it worked!” he exclaims, patting his body down. “It worked, holy shit.”

Now. He has to find Eleven.

## 2. Chapter Zero: The Phoenix and the Ashes

### Summary for the Chapter:

Over and over she taps out the phrase, hopping Hopper hears her. It takes fifteen minutes and Eleven is at the point where she thinks her thumb might fall off, stiff and sore and getting sluggish on the button, and then the radio starts to beep back.

*O – N – M – Y – W – A – Y – S – T – A – Y – P – U – T*

“On my way,” Eleven murmurs. “Stay put.” She taps back one word: *P – R – O – M – I – S – E*.

### Notes for the Chapter:

The first chapter is officially here - an we're still not actually into the main bulk of the story! - and it's a whole day early! I realised I had to work on the 20th almost all day, and decided to treat y'all.

Some notes, **PLEASE READ** - this is sort of like a world building chapter. This entire chapter is an *alternate backstory* for Stranger Things 2, and is where I started blending the two canons together. If there are any Stephen King fans reading this, this is a crossover with IT only, NOT with the Dark Tower series. However, on that note, if you haven't read at least IT, please give [this webpage](#) a quick read through, and direct any questions [here](#).

### Chapter Zero: The Phoenix and the Ashes

#### 1983-1984

Pain. Cold, wet, burning pain. In her chest, in her hands, in her face.

She can't breathe. Panic settles over her, and Eleven coughs and splutters, a thick watery substance erupting out of her mouth and splattering down her chest as she tries to sit up. Everything hurts, and she is alone. Slowly, she works first on getting to her knees, her bare skin aching as it touches the freezing floor, and then on getting to her feet, her breathing stilted and laboured, punctuated by horrible gurgling noises. Bracing her hand on the chalkboard beside her, Eleven coughs up more of the water, the taste foul and stagnant in her mouth as she wipes her lips on the sleeve of Hopper's flannel shirt. "Mike?" she croaks, squinting in the strange light to try and catch sight of the boy. "Mike!" She staggers towards the door. Surely Mike wouldn't leave her behind? "MIKE!"

Eleven stands in the empty corridor of the place Mike called 'school' and immediately realises where she is, and why she can't find Mike. She is in the Upside Down. She killed the Demogorgon and (*hopefully*) saved her friends – did they find Will? did they bring him back to his mother, who had loved and held Eleven like her own daughter despite only meeting her once? – and now she is trapped. "MIKE!" she screams, setting off running in a blind panic.

She doesn't understand the passage of time, doesn't know how long she runs blindly around the school, hesitant to set foot outside into even more of the unknown, and then she sees the red light. At the end of the corridor, lit by shadows and wrapped in feathery vines that reach out to stroke and grab and trap, something is glowing, pulsing, the bright red even brighter in the darkness of the Upside Down. It draws her in, making her eyes water all over again at its contrast to her surroundings, looking for all intents and purposes like someone had punched a hole clean through the bricks and then patched it up with semi-transparent rubber.

The hole in the wall is tiny, barely the size of her head, and she kneels before it, peering through the mucus-covered membrane with her disgust clear on her face. She can't see a lot – it's distorted and rippled, and the sound is muffled like when she's in the bathtub – but she eventually makes out a large figure on the other side.

"That you, kid?" Hopper asks softly, hands braced on the wall on his side of the wall. Eleven can't make out the details of his facial expression (*wouldn't understand them even if she could*) but she can

hear the worried relief in his voice. “Are you hurt?”

“Yes,” she answers truthfully, her own small hands pressing against the slimy surface separating her from the big man. “Pain.”

He sucks in a sharp breath, and to her, it sounds like a gunshot. “Is it bad?”

Eleven assesses herself. She isn’t bleeding, her nose not included, and none of her bones appear to be broken. Her eyes are a little sore and sensitive, and her hands are shuddery, fingers twitching and flexing as if trying to dispel the pent-up energy still inside them. “No. Surface hurt. Going away.” His relief is palpable, even when they are essentially worlds apart. “Did you find Will?”

“Yeah, kid,” Hopper says evenly. “We found him. He’s okay.”

“Good,” she replies shortly, genuinely glad that Mike’s friend is safe. That brief moment in her *mind place*, when she had found Will and held his hand to let him know his family was coming for him felt like it was a lifetime ago, not only a short little while (*minutes? hours? days?*) ago. She felt something stir in her when she had seen him, curled and pale and nearly dead, but Eleven has never heard the word ‘protective’ before, and therefore can’t use it to label her emotions. “And Mike?” She wants to ask where he is, if he’s looking for her, if he misses her the way she misses him, a deep ache in her chest like someone squeezing her lungs in their hands.

Hopper coughs, sounding... agitated? Unsure? Scared? Eleven doesn’t know. “He’s not so good. None of them are.” He looks over his shoulder. “Can you get out of there?”

Frowning in concentration, Eleven takes a step back from the wall and holds her hand out, focusing on the barrier separating her from Hopper; separating her from Mike. But she is weak, so, so weak, from disintegrating the Demogorgon, and no matter how hard she tries and how much blood drips from her nose (*and her ears and her fingernails and her eyes*) she can only manage a tiny slit, fresh air pouring in with white light and the smell of freedom. She collapses forwards and pushes her hand through the gap, choking on a scream as the wet, fleshy walls of the tiny slippery gateway suck on her skin and try to

force her hand out. Her fingers break through, she can feel the warmth, and Hopper's gigantic hand grabs on, trying to help pull her through.

Their efforts are in vain. She can't get the gate open wide enough, and the pull of the Upside Down is too strong. Something doesn't want her to leave. Eleven screams in frustration as her hand slides back out, and she cradles it to her stomach all covered in goo. "Help me!" she cries to Hopper through the gap. "I want to go home! I want Mike!"

"I'm gonna get you out, kid," Hopper murmurs reassuringly, if a little frantic and frustrated. "I won't leave you in there."

Eleven sits down heavily on the floor, her face a mess of blood and tears. "P-promise?"

"I promise," he says. "I promise I'll get you out." She can see him shifting rapidly through the gap, his brown eyes flashing as it starts closing over again. "You need to get to the Lab on your side," he begins relaying instructions. "The gate you opened is still there, it's how we got Will out. Wait for me there, okay? I'll come through and get you. Do you understand?"

"The Lab," Eleven repeats back diligently. "Wait there."

Hopper's fatherly smile is the last thing of clarity she sees before the hole seals over again, the rubber barrier slopping thickly back into place. "Good girl," he says. A cracking noise starts up quietly, and Eleven realises that the wall is closing completely, plaster beginning to reform over the hole. "Shit," Hopper curses. "Wait for me at the Lab, kid!" he yells. "Wait for me!"

"I will!" she calls back, just as the hole disappears, taking the red glow and the warmth away and leaving her in the cold and the dark. "I will..."

She stays huddled against the wall for a very long time. She even falls asleep for a while, blinking herself awake and swaying dangerously as she stands. "The Lab," she says determinedly, beginning to walk. Even though she doesn't know what the exact direction she should

head in is, Eleven can sense something pulling her somewhere. She just hopes it's towards the Lab.

Her feet are like bricks on the ends of her legs by the time her gut tells her to stop walking, throbbing and swollen in her borrowed shoes as she comes to a standstill beside the chain-link fence of Hawkins Laboratory. Score one for her gut instincts. Hooking her fingers through the fence, she peers inside. There's a big metal structure in the courtyard, where Eleven remembers the Bad Men parking their cars. She doesn't know what it is, but it has long metal spikes sticking out the top, and flashing lights all down the side. If she focuses her powers on it, she can feel the huge amounts of energy humming all around it, and she realises that it's not a part of the Upside Down – it's from the Right-side Up! – and that that might be where Hopper wants her to wait. Panting slightly, exhausted from everything that has happened to her since Mike brought her to the school, Eleven uses the last of her energy to blast a hole at the bottom of the fence, crawling under it and to the foot of the... thing. She finds a nook at its base and pulls her knees to her chest, tugging the skirt of her now-filthy dress and the edges of the flannel around her to keep the cold at bay.

And then, she waits.

If Eleven had access to a watch, she would know that she slept for three hours and twenty-eight minutes. She would know that it had been nine hours and forty-two minutes since she was dragged (*fell*) into the Upside Down. She would know that she waits for twelve and a half hours until something happens other than her jumping and startling at every strange sound she hears, or something flickers past her, just out the corner of her eye. The thing she's leaning on starts to beep, slowly at first, and then it matches her heartbeat, and then it beeps so rapidly it's almost one consistent sound.

Eleven jumps to her feet, one hand raised to defend herself in case whatever the beeping signifies is dangerous. Out of the gloom, a figure emerges from the doors of the Lab, clad in one of those strange silver suits that look like the *ass-troh-norts* Mike had shown her one night, after giving her a book about space to entertain herself with once Karen forced him to go to bed. It looms closer, taking carefully deliberate steps until it spots her, and it breaks into a short sprint.

Elven prepares to blast it away, but it grabs her before she can, and that's when she realises just how much her pain is affecting her, her head swimming and her body sagging. The hands settle deftly on her shoulders and shove her – surprisingly gently – behind the big metal thing, pushing her down on her knees carefully before crouching in front of her. She struggles against it, wiggling and kicking out with her feet. "*Easy, kid!*" a voice barks inside the helmet, and she freezes. It takes its helmet off with one hand, revealing Hopper underneath.

Crying out in a jumble of mashed up emotions, Eleven throws herself against his chest, burying her head against his shoulder as he pats her head. "It's okay," he mutters, allowing her to cling to him for a minute before pulling away to sit in front of her. He looks around furtively, and reaches down to the belt of the suit, pulling out a piece of folded paper, a wrapped packet of Eggos, and one of the hand-held radios Mike had in his room. Pressing them into her hands, he begins talking in a low, quiet voice, words coming out so quickly Eleven almost can't follow him. "You have to get away from here," he says urgently. "The Bad Men are looking all over for you, and I don't know what they want you for. I'm going to go back and tell them I couldn't find you, and you are going to run far away." Hopper rubs his hand over her scalp firmly, like he's comforting himself rather than her. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know I said I'd get you out but–"

"The Bad Men," Eleven whispers. She understands. She knows that friends don't lie, and that you can't break a promise. But the Bad Men seem to turn everything wrong.

"Exactly," Hopper says. "Exactly. I saw their monitors, there is another gateway open somewhere in this shithole, it's big and it's old, and all you have to do is find it. I don't know where it comes out, but it can't be too far away from Hawkins. When you find your way out, you use this–" he taps the hand holding the radio, "-and this–" this time, he taps the paper, "-to tell me where you are. It's Morse Code, so you can call me without using words. Call me, and I'll come and get you. Understand?"

Eleven bites her lip and nods. She doesn't want to cry again, her eyes feel hot and itchy and she thinks crying is going to make it worse, but tears start rolling anyway. "I understand."

And again, if Eleven had access to a watch, she'd know that she waited approximately twelve minutes after tightly hugging Hopper goodbye to take off running, and that she ran until her legs gave out some four hours later. At that point, she doesn't know where she is anymore. Nothing around her looks familiar – all the dead, decaying trees look the same, and the leaf-covered, sponge-textured ground offers her feet little comfort as she tries to push herself a few more steps – and she collapses, her face sinking into the marshy leaves until she can't breathe for choking on the dampness, and she flops over onto her side, dry heaving and light-headed, her tongue moving furiously to get the taste out of her mouth. She thinks she might be sick, or pass out, or both. Or, to save on time and maximise pain, maybe her entire body might just implode. As she's lying there, heaving in the floating particles in the foul air, it starts to rain, and the drops that fall from the ever-cloudy sky are like tiny splashes of acid boring holes into her clothes and pin-pricking her skin, red welts starting to form on her hands and exposed cheek after a few minutes. Squinting through the sweat dripping into her eyes before raising her hand to protect them from the rain, Eleven spots a great, hulking hill just in front of her, a viny, moss-covered ledge jutting out fatly over a large, round rock.

It takes agonizing minutes fighting the rain and her wrung-out body for Eleven to pull herself towards the hill, her fingers bruised and bleeding by the time she's forcing her jolting, juddery body to drunkenly climb the rock, painfully numb feet wedged into deep cracks that shred the soles of her shoes, her toes splitting open and bleeding down the scaly rock face. When she reaches the top, her left foot slips on some slime and she rolls down into the crevice between rock and ledge with a winded gasp and a dull smacking sound. Curling into a ball where the rock actually seems to be fused to the underside of the ledge, Eleven pats her pocket to make sure she still has everything given to her by Hopper, her upset at discovering the Eggos missing the final straw for her over-worked mind, causing her to black out with the radio crackling in her grip.

It's refreshingly warm inside her makeshift cave, like the very rock she's lying on is producing heat, and sound seems muted in there, washing over her in steady waves like a giant heartbeat or a set of lungs. Eleven slips into her *mind place* in her unconscious state, her

exhaustion enough to deprive her of all her senses. In the total darkness, she sits still and calm in the thin pool of water, revelling in not feeling any pain for the first time. She thinks about all of her friends, wonders if they're looking for her. Eleven misses all of them, but she can't help but stray solely to Mike until he materialises in her *mind place*, looking forlorn and tired where he is cross-legged in the blanket fort. His radio is clutched in both trembling hands, and Eleven watches him as he opens his mouth and speaks.

"It's me, it's Mike... it's been thirty-three hours. I don't know where you are. Please, if you're out there – *please* Eleven. El. Where are you?"

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*Eleven sleeps for a long, long time. Long enough that her skin heals, the damage cause by the acid rain healing down to tiny white scars like constellations across her legs and hands and her left cheek, freckles in reverse. Her feet harden up, her bruises turn yellow before disappearing completely, her body rests. And, as she sleeps, her hill begins to move.*

*The ancient turtle lumbers to their feet with an elegance cultivated only through an eternity or four of existence, careful of the child deep in slumber under its shell. In between this blink, and the last, Maturin has felt a new gateway clumsily ripped open, a gaping wound linking this dying and decaying reality once again to the fresh new world the turtle once threw up. Using an iota of their waning powers to heal and tune this child is nothing to Maturin, making their way away somewhere.*

---

Mike is back in the blanket fort with his radio. Eleven can see him in her *mind place*. "It's Mike again. It's day twenty-nine." He has been crying. Even with the muted colours inside the endless black, Eleven can see his watery eyes and blotchy cheeks. "Lucas thinks that you're dead. We had a fight about it, but now I feel stupid. I'm going to apologise for pushing him off his bike." He puts the radio down and the fort fizzles out of existence. Mike radioing her is the only way Eleven can tell the time is passing. To her, it feels like she takes a single breath, walks a single step, and suddenly Mike is back with a new day, and a new wave of emotions for her. She misses him so, so

much. Her friend, her family, her *Mike*.

She passes the time trying to explore her *mind place*. There's a room – with tall cement walls and a big heavy door bolted across with planks of wood, a crude sign hanging off a nail reading 'Open Me' – that she can walk all the way around, but she can't work out how to get the door open, despite the teasing sign. Whatever is inside is clearly very important, if it's trying so hard to keep her out. Around and around she walks, for days on end, her fingers rubbing the rough walls keeping her from getting inside. When she presses her ear against the door, so hard it makes her head throb, she can hear a voice inside (*soft, quiet, faint, imaginary, familiar*) whispering what sounds like nonsense. Eleven frowns, ignores the burning protest in the shell of her ear, and listens with all her might. "Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-Fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the—"

"Hey, it's Mike." Eleven pulls away from the strange room and the stranger voice and turns her head to look at Mike, in his pyjamas this time and worrying his dinosaur figurine in his hand. "It's eight o'clock. Sunday night. Day forty-five. Will had an episode today and his mom had to pick him up from my house to take him somewhere. It was really scary. He went all still and pale and then—" he hiccoughs, seeming to shrink in on himself. Eleven crouches down next to him and strokes his hair, drawing her hand back like she's been burnt when he disappears.

"Mike?" she calls, trying to bring him back. He hadn't finished talking to her! "MIKE!" The water splashes around her bare feet as she runs blindly in the darkness. "Mike, come back!"

She runs and runs, and that stupid locked room looms into view again, so Eleven turns on her heel and goes in a different direction. It appears before her again, and she drops into a sitting position with her arms crossed stubbornly, refusing to go anywhere near the room. She huffs out a frustrated sigh and closes her eyes briefly. Something bumps her knees, and her eyes jump open again. The room is right in front of her, one of its walls brushing her skin, and she falls over backwards trying to see up to the top. It doesn't seem to have a top, and now her back is cold and wet. Eleven frowns at the room, rolling

over onto her knees and walking away again. She's not in the mood to listen to crazy ramblings through a door she can't open. Closing her eyes again (*if I can't see you, you can't see me*) Eleven ignores the room, hoping it isn't there when she opens them.

"Day fifty-three," Mike's voice reaches her, and Eleven stares at him glumly, her knees touching his hip now, the cotton of his sweatpants a phantom, pleasantly soft contrast to the harsh cement. "Dustin found my Millennium Falcon model today, and he got all teary eyed because I told him you made it fly once and he never got to see it." Eleven's lips twitch up in a small smile at the thought of Dustin getting emotional over Mike's plastic spaceship. "We all miss you, El." Mike bites his lip and fiddles with the radio aerial. "So much. Even Will misses you, and he's never met you."

He fades away again, and Eleven pulls her knees to her chest, playing idly with her big toes. Mike says it's been fifty-three days since they last saw each other, so why does it only feel like hours? She isn't hungry and she doesn't feel tired – although, she is technically inside her head, so she wouldn't feel tired, would she? – and she certainly doesn't feel like she's been running in circles for fifty-three days. Eleven is amazed at how lonely she suddenly is – twelve years of isolation should mean she can cope with being on her own, and maybe she would be able to, if it hadn't been for a certain few people (*a certain specific person*) showing her more love and kindness in just five days than she had ever experienced in her entire life – and she finds herself lingering on Mike's comment about Will Byers. *Even Will misses you, and he's never met you.*

But they had met, hadn't they? Right here in her *mind place*. Eleven picks her head up off her knees and stares at her hands, thinking about how she had held Will Byers' hand, about how her hands which have killed have now also brought comfort. That makes something warm and fluttery bubble in her stomach. *Pride*. She is proud of herself for helping Will.

There's a sudden splash behind her, and she whips around as best she can, eyes wide, searching for the source of the noise. Something is flailing in the water, and Eleven runs towards it until a bright spot of colour appears out of the darkness. Eleven skids to a halt a few feet away, the ripples from her toes meeting the significantly more violent

ones of her apparent visitor, her eyes wide. There, as if summoned by her thoughts of him, is Will Byers, pyjamas and all, his arms spinning wildly as his eyes dart around in a frantic panic.

“Hello?” he calls, voice reedy with fear. “Mike?” His thin chest is heaving under his shirt, and Eleven drops wetly to her knees, hovering hands unsure where to land on him to calm him down, or if he’s really there at all. For all Eleven knows, thinking about him has caused her to see him the way she sees Mike. “No, let me go!” Will shrieks when her fingers graze his skin. “No, no – oh!” He finally seems to focus on her, stilling completely. “Oh... You’re real,” he breathes, sounding almost awed. Will is looking at her with big, greenish eyes, and she feels that strange emotion again (*protective*) that she had the first time she saw him as they stare at each other in silence. He has dark shadows under his eyes, his cheeks are gaunt, and Eleven thinks he looks more sickly now than he did when she saw him in the Upside Down. “Where are we?”

Eleven wrinkles her nose as she says, “*Mind place*,” trying to emphasise the words, because she doesn’t know how else to describe the blackness and the water. “In here.” She taps her temple, and then gently repeats the action on Will, who carefully takes her hand and uses it to steady himself as he sits up. Something in her gut swoops funny at the contact. “Okay?” Eleven asks anxiously as Will seems to wilt, his spine bowing awkwardly once he is upright.

“How did I get here?” Will asks softly, his hand still wrapped around hers, deflecting her concern so expertly even Eleven (*she has never learned how to understand the subtleties of other people’s emotions*) knows he’s avoiding the question.

Narrowing her eyes suspiciously, Eleven replies, “Sensory dep-ree-vashun.” She has to sound the word out, having only heard it for the first time when Dustin was on the phone to whatever a *mistahclark* is. Maybe Will can explain that to her. She slowly covers his eyes with her free hand, moving it next to cover his ear and raising their joined hands to cover the other. “Do you remember me?”

“Yes,” Will says instantly, his hand tightening around hers as they lower onto his leg. “You’re Eleven.”

A harsh sob interrupts them, their heads turning in sync to see Mike kneeling on the floor of his basement, just close enough to the fort to have grabbed the radio. He hasn't just been crying this time, he is openly weeping, shoulders shaking and hands trembling. "It's me, it's Mike, I can't... I don't... It's day seventy-seven. Will is." He chokes, one hand pressing his mouth closed slightly for a moment to muffle the grating sound. "Will is *gone*, and you're *gone*, and I don't know where – I don't know. I don't *know!*" Mike sinks down onto his stomach, looking for all the world like an abandoned child as he cries, his cheek pressed to the carpet.

"Mike!" Will exclaims, staggering to his feet and practically dragging Eleven over to the boy. "Mike, I'm right here!" He reaches for Mike with his free hand, desperate to comfort his distraught friend, and he digs his nimble fingers into Mike's sweater, tugging lightly and trying to get his attention. "Mike, *Mike!*" When he gets no response beyond more sobbing on Mike's part, he turns his face up to Eleven, and she loses her breath briefly at the expression. "*Why can't he hear me?*"

"He's not here, like us," Eleven whispers. She taps Will's head again, and murmurs, "We're here." She points to Mike's basement floor. "He's there." It's not a very good explanation, but Will seems to understand, his bottom lip quivering and his eyes watering.

Drawing his hand away from Mike very slowly, Will blinks, tears starting to swim in the green depths as he pulls in close to Eleven, grounding himself. "What does he mean, I'm gone?"

"I don't know." As their small exchange takes place, Mike disappears again, and Will lets out a little scream of his friend's name when he notices. "Will," Eleven says softly, squeezing his hand.

They sit in silence again, facing each other with their legs all tangled and their hands still clasped, staring at each other and occasionally making silly faces to try and prompt the other into laughing to lighten the mood, a unanimous decision made that there have already been too many tears. It, to them, is like they don't have to speak out loud to talk to each other. They share a connection – a horrible, nightmarish connection forged out of pain and suffering and having their childhood innocence ripped away – that no one else could ever hope to understand, and it resonates between them like a

shimmering thread, strong and unbreakable. Eventually, Will breaks into a wide smile, his whole face suddenly lighting up.

“Your hair is growing out,” he giggles softly, eyes crinkling slightly as he daintily touches the shaggy ends of her hair where it’s starting to tumble down over her eyebrows. Eleven hadn’t even noticed, and she reaches up too, blinking in shock when she feels soft chunks of hair under her fingers instead of the bristly almost-baldness she is used to. “It suits you,” Will assures her earnestly, seeing the look on her face. Eleven thanks him quietly, smiling shyly, and reaches out to prod his cheek until they’re both giggling brightly. Will peters out into breathy huffs, his face so ridiculously fond Eleven feels like he’s known her forever. “I can see why the others miss you,” he tells her.

Eleven ponders this statement, her head tilting to the side. “I miss them too.”

Will opens his mouth to say something else, when his eyes trail off to stare at something over Eleven’s shoulder, and it’s his turn to tilt his head curiously, doe eyes bright with an inquisitive sparkle. “What’s that building?” he asks her, sounding almost excited at the prospect of some mystery building. Eleven holds back a groan, not even needing to turn around to know exactly which miraculously reappeared building Will is talking about. It has to be the locked room. The mere thought of it causes her to growl in frustration, and then the wood plank barring the door is pressing into her back. “Whoa,” Will says, drawing the sound out as he rocks backwards to look at it properly, his pretty face going slack in thought. “Are your memories all locked up in there?”

When she turns around to shoot the door a nasty look, deeply annoyed at it for not cooperating, Will lets out a shocked gasp, and then falls completely silent. “Will, you okay?” Eleven asks, turning back to him. Will is gone. She whips her head around looking for him, and the locked room is still there. “Will?” She staggers to her feet, water splashing everywhere as she runs around the room looking for him. “Will!”

A radio crackles. “Hey, El.” Mike. “It’s day eighty-four. Will came back today!” Mike is grinning widely down at his radio, perched cross-legged in the blanket fort. His dark, shiny hair is starting to curl

at the ends, rumpled at the back like he's been running his hands through it a lot, and the tops of his cheeks are flushed a happy pink. "He came stumbling out of the woods all dazed and confused, and he said—" he cuts himself off, looking up at something. Will suddenly appears beside him, crawling into the fort and grabbing the radio.

"I told him I was with you," Will whispers. His eyes are slowly tracking the air in front of the two boys, trying to see if he can spot her. Eleven crawls over and waves her hand in front of his nose, hoping maybe that will work. All Will does is sneeze, Mike instantly handing him a tissue. "Thanks." He flashes a small smile at Mike. "I didn't mean to leave you like that, Eleven," Will adds. "I'm sorry. But maybe I'll see you again?"

"Please come back," Eleven says to him. "Or come find me," she adds to Mike. Neither boy reacts, and when Mike removes the radio from Will's hands and tenderly sits it back onto the pillow he had once given Eleven, they fade away. "No!" Eleven yelps, diving forwards as if hoping to catch them. "No! No!"

She feels like Will took her happiness away with him.

"Back... go back..."

*The child talks in her sleep. It has been so long since Maturin last interacted with a being from the world they had accidentally created, that it took them a slow breath or two to figure out what the strange sound is. They walk slowly through the Nether, always careful not to jolt the child that is still resting under their shell, carefully feeding the child enough energy to heal and to learn without overwhelming her small form. Maturin knows that the child cannot stay with them in the Nether forever, even the mighty turtle's power is not enough to keep the dying air from claiming her lungs and stopping her heart. As they set one foot in front of the other, laboriously making their way to the first gate, Maturin recalls the other human child they have seen in the Nether.*

*The boy had died, chased beyond his limits by one of the half-developed creatures running amok in the shadows, and as the child had cried out for help with his dying breath, Maturin had seen a bright light flicker out far*

*away in the future. They had saved the child, feeding enough life directly into his tiny body to sustain him until more humans had retrieved him.*

*Maturin wonders if the child survived. He will be needed if there is any hope for his reality.*

“We’re back again,” Mike says quietly into the radio, careful not to wake Will, fitfully asleep with his head in Mike’s lap. “It’s day one hundred and sixty.” Mike gently pets Will’s hair as he talks to Eleven, and she squashes the ugly (*jealousy rearing its head, why can’t she be there too?*) boiling in her stomach at the sight of the two of them. Will’s body is angled awkwardly, like he’s left room for an extra person there too. “We all still miss you. Will tries to visit you, but he doesn’t know how, and he’s too terrified of suffocating for us to try and make a bath for him.” Will mumbles under his breath in his sleep and Mike freezes, looking guilty all of a sudden as he snatches his hand away from the younger boy’s soft hair. “I hope we can find you.”

Eleven stomps away from where Mike and Will had been once they’re gone, and runs headfirst into the locked room. Suddenly furious, she throws her hands out and screams, trying to blast the door open. She wants to go home and be with Mike! She wants to see Will again! She wants to eat Eggos and ride bikes and look pretty! She wants to see her friends and live the life she has been denied ever since she was born! Eleven screams and screams and screams, sometimes words (*Mike! Will! Lucas! Dustin!*) and sometimes just sounds. Her nose drips blood from both nostrils, fat drops of it falling into the black water and vanishing, and it drips from her ears, matting the small curls starting to form in her ever-growing hair. One final push starts to split her nail beds as the wooden beam splinters and groans, the concrete around the door cracking and crumbling, puffs of dust floating off it and away.

“*LET ME IN!*” she thunders, and the door explodes open, knocking her back off her feet and sprawling. Eleven shuts her eyes briefly, panting, and the first thing she notices when she opens them is that the blood on her hands is gone, and her face is dry. The second thing, is that the room, too, is gone, and in its place there stands a single

rocking chair, the arched back of it facing Eleven as it rolls gently backwards and forwards in the water, a head of dirty blonde-grey hair tumbling down over the wood. Tentatively, slightly fearfully, Eleven crawls towards the chair, her eyes trained on it. In that moment, that rocking chair and the mysterious woman sitting in it are the most precious things in the world to her – they must be important if she had to fight her way to get to them – and she sits reverently in front of the woman, just staring.

The woman is the source of the nonsense muttering, repeating herself over and over again. “Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty...” Now that Eleven can see where the words are coming from, they no longer cause her anger and annoyance, but, instead, she feels questioning, curious, and a deep sense of unsettled sadness for the shell-like woman before her, her blank eyes and sallow skin glowing in the never ending black of the *mind place*. “Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty.” Eleven touches the woman’s hand with cautious fingers, and those hollow eyes snap to her, looking *through* her rather than *at* her. “Jane.” The new word throws Eleven for a loop, and she leans in as close as she can, hoping for more, anything, to explain who this woman is and why she’s in Eleven’s head. “Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty.”

Disappointed but still invested, Eleven listens to the woman speak for a long time. She hears Mike tell her that it’s ‘day one hundred and ninety-four’ at one point, and ‘day two hundred and twelve’ at another, but for once she doesn’t want to run to him. This strange woman has her held captive, the words effectively hypnotising her and Eleven feels like she’s falling, falling, falling –

“Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty.”

– *It plays out in front of her like the moving pictures she saw on Mike’s TV, this woman – Terry Ives – delivering her baby so many weeks too*

*early (breathe) and being told that she had miscarried by her sister days later when she wakes up again (sunflower), despite hearing the cry as the baby was taken away. Eleven watches Terry Ives practically tear herself apart trying to find her child, trying to find her little girl Jane, and Eleven feels like there's lead in her stomach as Terry Ives' search leads her to Hawkins Lab. The years flash by with every blink Eleven can't hold back, and Terry Ives is kneeling by a safe (three to the right, four to the left) and she pulls out a gun.*

*She follows Terry Ives as the woman sneaks into the lab, threatening security with her gun and escaping into the halls in the chaos. Together – to Eleven – they check every room, Terry Ives yelling, "JANE?" around every corner, until they spot the drawing taped to the wall (rainbow) and Terry Ives nearly falls over herself in her mad scramble to get inside.*

*Eleven's heart leaps into her throat when she sees the rainbow. She recognises that drawing. She helped make that drawing. Inside the room, Terry Ives is cooing, "Jane, there you are!" as Eleven is creeping inside the doorway, and there everything freezes, except Eleven, who thinks she might as well be frozen too, because she can't move her feet for fear of fainting.*

*Six children are cooped up inside the room. Eleven doesn't know how to estimate ages, but there's a baby, and a girl who looks old enough to be friends with Mike, Dustin, and Lucas, and four more children in between. But Eleven isn't looking at all of them as a whole too much. She is looking at a small, brunette child – a little girl – sitting on the white tiles with her legs splayed out on either side of her like the letter M, stacking brightly coloured blocks with two other children. A dark-skinned girl is eyeing up the block tower critically, while the tiny boy beside her, his hair like a curly golden crown, tries to add a blue block on top. They're the only three children in the room she can see properly, the other three seem duller, greyed-out.*

*The little girl Eleven can't look away from is staring at Terry Ives, her head tilted to the side. Her arms are bare – all the children are dressed in short-sleeved shirts and dark overalls – and Eleven zeros in on the stark black tattoos on their arms. 008. 012. 011.*

*Everything starts moving again so quickly that Eleven stumbles to her knees, one hand clutching her head as she never breaks eye contact with*

*the girl. Terry Ives reaches out with trembling hands, her face lit up like the sun as she cries, “Jane, oh Jane, Jane...” and the girl reaches out for her too.*

*“Mama,” Eleven whispers, her eyes burning. Mike and Dustin, with Lucas adding in his snide comments, had explained – to the best of their abilities – what parents were to her. She had wanted to know who this ‘mom’ was that Mike kept referring to, why their missing friend had a ‘mom’ but also a ‘Joyce’, and why the boys sometimes used those words were sometimes used interchangeably to refer to what turned out to be the same woman. Eleven knows now that man she called ‘Papa’ wasn’t really her father, and that she had her own ‘mom’ out there somewhere. “Mama,” she says again, firmer. She likes the word.*

*And then Terry Ives, her mama, is being dragged out of the room by security. Eleven watches her scream and fight tooth and nail to the very last second to get back to the little girl, when the strange man flicks a switch (four-fifty) and she falls silent, lying on the gurney with that orange gag still resting in her open mouth. Terry Ives is taken away, and the memories sputter around Eleven like a broken lightbulb, her the moth to its dying light, following it until it goes out altogether with an almighty explosion. Eleven chokes on her breath, she feels like she’s in the dark room again, the walls pressing in around her, the deafening silence squeezing her mind and –*

*“Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty.”*

– Her *mind place* expands out before her, Eleven and her mother, only the sound of the water dripping off the rocking chair breaking the still, quiet peace as Eleven breathes and tries to process everything she had just seen and experienced. Her mother really is out there somewhere, forcibly trapped in her own mind and yet she is *still* looking for her daughter. Eleven has a flash of thought – she doesn’t know it, but she has an epiphany – maybe... the locked room was the last of Papa’s conditioning preventing her mother from finding her? All she had needed, in the end, was enough frustrated determination to break through the door, and, really, isn’t that all she has ever needed to do anything?

“Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty...” Terry Ives’ no-longer nonsense mantra quietly fills the *mind place*.

Eleven is so consumed by her thoughts that Mike’s voice actually scares her when he starts speaking from a little way off to her right. “El, I miss you so much,” he starts quietly, his voice sad and fond and angry and a million other emotions Eleven can’t describe and she shoots one last, longing look at her mother before crawling over to Mike. He is alone this time, wrapped in a thick quilt all the way up over his head, just his face and hands poking out (*cute, Eleven thinks*) as he fiddles with the radio antenna. “It’s day two hundred and thirty-one, and weird things have been happening. No, that’s not right.” He scrubs his cheek against his quilt-covered shoulder, bottom lip caught between his teeth. “I’ve been weird. Since Will came back, I’ve been feeling – I don’t know. I wish you were here.”

“Me too,” Eleven replies, catching the corner of his quilt in her fingers.

“You said once that you understood what I was talking about, and I know that you really did, and I think that you’d understand now, but...” he pouts, eyes flickering down in thought. “You aren’t here, and I don’t even know if you can hear me. Will is starting to think he dreamed meeting you. He can’t even describe what the place was like, he-” Mike’s head jerks up, eyes un-focusing slightly as if someone is talking to him and he really just isn’t listening to a word they say. Eventually, he replies, “Whatever, mom,” and puts the radio down with a sad little sigh, standing up and shuffling away, still wrapped up in his quilt.

Eleven forgets she has part of it in her hand until Mike is far enough away that the patchwork material pulls taught and he staggers, jerked backwards by the motion. Her hands snap up in shock, dropping the quilt. Mike’s eyes are huge, and Eleven thinks she might be mirroring the expression. In that moment, she wants – more than she ever has before – to be right there next to him, in his reality. There’s a tug in her chest, a *zing* in her head, and she calls out, “Mike.”

Mike jumps a foot in the air when Eleven’s voice crackles out of the

radio. “El?” he barks, diving forwards and scooping the radio to his chest. “El, are you there?!”

“Mike!” Eleven exclaims, deflating almost immediately when her voice doesn’t pass through the veil, the dimensional gap, the whatever it is keeping her apart from Mike, for a second time. “Mike?”

“Hello? El?!” Mike sounds desperate, fiddling frantically with the knobs and switches on the radio, trying to tune into her. “Eleven!” he cries for her, unaware that she is *right there*, screaming his name and trying to reach out to him. “Eleven, where are you?”

*Eleven where are you? Eleven where are you? Eleven where are you? Eleven where are you?*

The four words repeat over and over, hanging in the air so thickly she can practically see them written out in front of her. They overlap, merge into each other, run backwards until they stop sounding like words, until they stop sounding like *Mike*. And then Mike fades away like he always does, but the words are still there, still inside her head, and this time, they’re not Mike. At first, they sound like Will, but that’s not quite right. She thinks, next, it might be Dustin’s voice, and then Hopper’s, and then lovely Joyce Byers, maybe even Terry Ives? But she soon realises that the voice doesn’t belong to a single person she met outside the Lab. It isn’t even Papa’s voice.

*Eleven where are you?*

“Where am I?” she asks her empty *mind place*.

—

*Maturin feels that they have reached their destination before they see it. They don’t see much with their eyes these days, half blind from old (very old, older than the very ground they stand on, older than the very idea of ‘old’) age, and half eaten away by the horrid, barely-formed creatures that exist in this place. They have crushed many of said creatures beneath their feet in their slow travels. Under their shell, the child still sleeps, held in stasis by Maturin’s powers, dilapidated over thousands of centuries, not needing to eat or drink or anything else*

*humans usually need to do, until she is ready. She is nearly ready. Once she breaks through the last wall in her Void State – finding her memories and breaching the barrier back into her own reality being the first of three – she will be complete.*

*And not a minute before she is meant to be ready, Maturin knows. The great turtle lies down at the foot of the gateway, their nose long ago stopped working, plugged with slime and decay and therefore immune to the putrid stench wafting out from the between-worlds lair of the Maternalum. This may just have been their last journey. If the child – children, for Maturin knows there are more like the girl out there – fulfils her destiny, and seals this world away forever, as it should be, Maturin will die along with the rest of the Nether. They're rather looking forward to that.*

–

“It’s day two hundred and sixty. Will has been acting really strange. I think he’s hiding something, and I’m really, *really* worried.”

The radio crackles.

“It’s day two hundred and seventy-two. I thought I heard you over the radio again today, but I just don’t know. El, I think I might be going crazy.”

Mama’s voice whispers, ‘*Breathe. Sunflowers. Three to the right. Four to the left. Rainbow. Four-fifty,*’ lost out in the darkness somewhere.

“It’s day two hundred and eighty-nine. I’m scared, El. I think there’s something wrong with me. I feel... weird things. For someone. And I miss you so badly, and – shit – now I just feel guilty.”

Eleven sways.

“It’s day three hundred. I really am losing my mind. If you were here, I’d know what to do. But you’re not, and I don’t know if you ever will be, and fuck! Now I’m crying again. All I ever do is cry, pine, worry, and play with this stupid radio!”

She wonders if the days are flying for Mike the way they do for her. Time is a foreign concept to her, but it can’t possibly have been that

long.

“It’s day three hundred and el. – el. – el. Fuck. Three hundred and eleven. Please. Please, El. Where are you?”

Eleven watches Mike’s terrible dance of days, every blink of her eyes bringing on a new appearance from a steadily more-distraught Mike. Some days, he cries. Some days, he’s borderline mad – never at her, he makes sure to clarify, but at himself, for all these mysterious conflicted feelings he’s having – and he curses more on those days. Most days, however, he seems flat. Like something isn’t turned on right, in his head or in his heart or his spirit, or like he’s missing something (*someone, maybe even more than one someone*) and Eleven feels all of those things with him. Will is with him sometimes, looking paler and more tired with every showing, always shivering like he’s freezing from the inside out. Those are the days when Mike seems the most Mike-like, one hand on his radio and the other always touching Will in some way, making sure the boy is still there, that he hasn’t vanished (*again*) too.

On day three hundred and twenty-seven, Will watches Mike stammer his way through another update with a face so sad Eleven thinks her heart breaks just for Will Byers. He reaches out and grabs Mike’s hand – the one holding the radio – when it won’t stop shaking. Eventually, Mike can’t even get any words out, and Will lets out a determined huff, suddenly darting forwards, right into Mike’s space. “I have an idea,” he whispers to Mike, his fingers trailing off Mike’s hand and onto the radio. He very, very hesitantly kisses Mike’s cheek before standing and walking off, Mike’s eyes (*Eleven’s too*) following after him, all wide and a little glassy. That’s how Mike fades away, and Eleven is left watching an empty space, and wondering why her chest hurts so much.

She stares until her eyes hurt, and then she closes them. Around her, the sound intensifies. Mama is still whispering in the back of her mind, the water is rippling quietly, and the silence is the loudest thing of all, crushing down on her, pressing her into the floor, and Eleven is almost helpless to fight it, sinking down into the water sideways. And then –

– a splash. A gasp. Heaving pants, loud, laboured, *familiar*.

“Will?” Eleven murmurs, her lips barely moving, scared to open her eyes in case she is somehow having a dream inside a dream.

“Oh my god, it worked!” Will’s voice echoes. It sounds off, odd in some way, thick and warped in a way that reminds Eleven unwittingly of Papa talking to her through a glass window during his many tests and experiments. “It worked, holy shit.”

Eleven sits up, eyes snapping open and searching. Will is standing directly in front of her, running his hands over himself in wonder, touching the rough denim of his jeans and the starchy material of the thin button-up dwarfing his tiny frame. “Will!” Eleven calls out happily, climbing to her feet and running towards him, not knowing if she’s going to hug him, jump on him (*kiss him*) or all of the above. “Will!” He doesn’t respond, and she tries again, her happiness ebbing just a little. “Will?” Just when she thinks she’s close enough to brush her fingers over his face, she stops. Not because she wants to, but because there is something in the way. She bangs her hands on the invisible obstruction, trying to find a way through. “Will, can you hear me?!”

Still rooted to the spot, looking a bit over-awed, Will’s eyes suddenly snap and focus on something a little to his right. “Eleven?” he asks tentatively, taking a step towards whatever it is, his sneakers making wet clicking noises on the water surface. “Eleven, are you there?”

“I’m right here!” she screams, following him as he starts walking, still slapping her hands on the barrier between them. “Will, I’m here!”

Will crouches down, and Eleven can finally see what he is looking at, her mouth dropping open in silent shock. It’s her, her body at least. She is lying at his feet, curled up stiffly. Her hair is wild and curly – she touches her own head and feels the curls she can see on her double – and she seems to have grown taller, the socks that reached her knees when first given to her by Mike now dipping four inches below that point. There are tendrils and vines wrapped almost tenderly around her limbs, sticking to her skin, webbed over her cheeks, and tangled in her hair as if tying her down wherever her body is lying, the thick ends of them disappearing into the black water and vanishing from sight. “El-eleven?” Will stammers, his eyes so large they’re at risk of bugging right out of his head. “Is that really

you?" He touches her head briefly, the tips of his fingers on her crown, and Eleven feels it, where she's trapped behind the thing separating them, like a trickle of warmth. Will takes the hand of her sleeping body, and Eleven flexes her own hand, the same warm feeling settling through it as he rubs his thumb over the back of her hand, brows creased in concentration. "Oh," Will murmurs after what could be hours, could be mere seconds of silence. "I understand. Before, I fell into your... whatever this place is. Now, I'm in my own." He smooths her hair back in an almost motherly-action. "I wonder if this is what you saw when you found me in the Upside Down?"

It occurs to Eleven then, that if Will is correct, she should be able to find where he is, like he has clearly found her. She concentrates, her eyes never leaving his stooped-over body. Something appears to her left, and she turns her head. She gets a fluttery feeling, like she's seen this before (*she has never heard the phrase 'déjà vu'*) when the image of Will's prone body sprawled out in Castle Byers appears in her *mind place*. This time, though, it has to be the real Castle Byers, because it looks alive and full of colour.

Now that she knows what is happening, sort of – rationalising it out in her brain gives her a headache – Eleven is determined to get to Will. She can't see the thing between them, the thing keeping her *mind place* a separate entity from his, but she will take it down with her bare hands if she has to. Her hands come up of their own accord, settling firmly against the barrier. That same *zing* shoots through her arms and out her fingertips, and something like a gun going off ricochets around her. A crack appears under hands, so tiny it's barely there. She pushes, her mind yelling *break, break, break, break* as she does, and soon she's saying it out loud too. Pain lances through her body at the amount of power she is using, and she ignores it, like she ignores the blood streaming into her mouth from her nose, dripping down her cheeks from her eyes like crimson tears, and slicking her neck up as it leaks from her ears. Her vision turns red around the edges, cracks spreading from her palms as if she's taken a sledge hammer to plate glass. Her fingers run with red as her nails split open. "*WILL!*" she roars, blood splattering the barrier, sizzling and steaming until there's a click, and the barrier shatters.

It knocks Eleven onto her ass, legs splayed and her whole body trembling, and Will gets thrown clean through the air, folding neatly in half when he lands heavily. The apparitions of Will and Eleven's prostrate bodies and their hiding places vanish as their two *mind places* crash together with an almighty bang. The shock waves cause gigantic walls of water to crash over the children, the cold black water slapping them, leaving their skin stinging and their limbs aching. Through the bone-numbing chill of it all, Eleven feels warmth *all over* her body, wrapping her up like a cocoon, and she can feel every fibre of Will, every cell that comprises Will Byers thrums alongside the matter that makes Elven, their minds connected so fully she can't even comprehend it.

"What the *fuck*?" Will squeaks, spitting water out of his mouth as he jolts upright, hands pressing to his temples. "What the f – Eleven?" He cuts himself off so quickly his mouth shuts with a sharp and audible click, eyes landing on Eleven and lighting up like she is the sun and he is seeing it for the first time. "Eleven!" He flounders in the water, his feet sliding around underneath him as he runs towards her, skidding and slipping and landing beside her in a heap as they both reach out for each other, sinking into a bone crushing hug with their faces buried in each other's shoulders. "I found you," Will whispers, his fingers digging in her flannel. "I told Mike I could do it." Her heart thuds loudly at the mention of Mike, and Will's eyes go wide. "Whoa." It's hardly a sound, more of an exhalation. "I can feel you in here," and he taps her temple, mirroring her own explanation from their second meeting.

Eleven clings to him, almost crying over how warm and real he feels. "You were in your own *mind place*," she says, overwhelmingly proud of Will for some reason. "I broke the wall between mine and yours. How did you know you could do it?"

She can feel his hands moving against her shoulder blades, pulling on one of his sleeves anxiously. "I..." He sighs, and pulls back. Eleven holds on tighter, not quite ready to give up the human contact yet, which makes him let out a breathy laugh, nosing her cheek fondly. Instead of letting her go, because she won't let him, he extracts one arm from behind her and crosses it over his lap. "I went missing again, that's how Mike describes it. When I saw you the last time,

that's when it happened. But, I don't remember anything that happened, except for being here with you. I went to bed one night and woke up there like I had never even left, but a whole week had passed, and I was all dirty and covered in leaves and weird cuts and bruises." He bites his lip, lifting his head up so he can look her in the eye. "And there was something else. I -" he huffs, cheeks turning a guilty shade of pink. "I haven't shown Mike, or any of the others. I didn't want any of them to worry more than they already do."

"What is it?" Eleven breathes, their faces so close his forehead bumps her nose when he drops his head to stare at the arm in his lap. She follows his line of sight, and her ears start ringing as she stares at his pale skin, practically glowing in the darkness, his sleeve rucked up to reveal the fresh and barely-healed 013 inked onto his forearm, just above his wrist. Eleven doesn't dare say anything, just brings her left arm down to rest beside it, her 011 faded to a dark grey beside the crisp black of Will's new brand. Flipping her arm over, she traces her fingers over the shapes of the numbers, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. Will seems to be holding his breath, chest rising shallowly and his throat working furiously as if he's afraid of her reaction. "How?" Eleven asks, covering the mark with her hand. When Will shakes his head, she says, "Can't remember?" which earns her a small nod. She shuffles closer, hugging him silently. "Buzzing brain," she says, and he nods again, a little slower. She bumps her forehead to his gently. "I understand."

And she does. Although she has memories of her laboratory home, and many of the things Papa made her do, there are gaps. Big, hazy gaps full of static and white noise that blares at her whenever she tries to think about it too hard, and a strange sticky feeling to them that screams at her to back off or she'll get stuck and never find her way out.

"Mike said you would," Will murmurs, a new kind of flush gracing his cheeks. There's a sudden air of guilt about him, and Eleven doesn't understand that, any more than she hadn't understood Mike's guilt over his 'weird feelings' for (*Will, obviously Will, who wouldn't have 'weird feelings' for Will Byers? Eleven can hardly describe her own feelings for Will Byers*) someone. "I can't wait to tell him he was right," and he grins breathlessly.

Eleven decides then and there that she is going to do *whatever* it takes to get out of her *mind place*, get out of the Upside Down, and get back to Hawkins. To her Mike, and her Will (*when did he become 'her' Will?*) and her friends, her *family*. “I think I might hug you first when I get back,” she says quietly, Will’s soft hair tickling her cheek and the end of her nose. She hopes she isn’t getting blood all over him, and then she remembers when she broke through the locked room and how all her blood had vanished.

“Do you promise?” Will asks, and they stand together. Eleven is slightly taller than Will, the tip of her nose level with the bridge of his. He must see the suddenly hesitant look on her face (*does Will know how important promises are to her? can she promise to hug him before she hugs Mike?*) and he squeezes her hands. “How about I be the first person *after* Mike?” That is acceptable, and he laughs a little at the smile that spreads over her face. “I’ll be looking forward to it.”

The last thing Eleven sees before her entire *mind place* shatters around her in shards of black and fragments of white is Will Byer’s bright grin shining in the middle of his wane face.

*The child breaks down the last wall in her Void State, connecting her with one of the other children created with her, and Maturin knows that she is ready. They wake her up with an imperceptible blink of their hollow eyes, and the child wakes up screaming, thrashing under Maturin’s shell so wildly she snaps the vines holding her in place, sending her rolling out over the turtle’s head, down its craggy snout, and tumbling onto the rotting ground below her. She lands on her feet like a graceful, wild animal, bloodshot eyes flicking around, cataloguing where she is. It seems to Maturin that she does not realise they are there. That is okay, to them. They have served their purpose to her.*

*It does not take the child long to notice she is near a gateway, and she scurries for it, eager and anxious and she does not cast the Nether a single backwards glance as she slips through the slime and vanishes. Good. Maturin knows that the Nether does not deserve a backwards glance from anyone, especially not a child who is going to save the world.*

Bile splatters against the stone under her feet, and Eleven is choking on the thick, sickly scent in the air as it curls into her lungs and sinks into her pores, clinging to her clothes and dragging her curls down. Her hand trembles violently where she has it pressed to what she thinks might be a wall as she supports herself, still heaving and spitting up the burning liquid. She doesn't know where she is – she had pushed through the gross, slimy membrane covering the gateway out of the Upside Down, and emerged into the forced darkness of a place that has never seen the sunlight, her feet squelching on wet stone as she made her way forwards – but she can feel that it is a bad place. Something *evil* and *ancient* is near her, and it makes her skin crawl and her heart pound so hard in her chest Eleven is afraid it might break right through her ribs and sink into the sludge at her feet.

Her only option is to keep moving and hope she finds the outside. She still has her piece of paper, crumpled in her hand while she slept and now folded carefully and tucked into the sleeve of her dress, and the radio is wedged under her right arm for safe keeping, but it appears to be fried – she intends to investigate both things properly when she can actually see more than four inches in front of her – and there most likely isn't a signal in a place so cold and dark she is certain its buried underground. One foot in front of the other, over and over and over. Somewhere in her jumble of a brain, she can feel Will's presence sort of floating there, but she is too overwhelmed to even try calling out to him.

*Jane...* a voice whispers in the darkness. She stumbles, startled. *Jane...* Her nose wrinkles at the name. She knows now that 'Jane' is what people would call her 'real name', as it is the name her mother gave her, but she has never been called that and, if she is being honest with herself, it makes her slightly uncomfortable. Like she hasn't earned the right to use the name given to a child that never existed, like 'Jane' is a separate being to Eleven. She ignores the voice and keeps walking, one hand on the wall as a guide, and on high alert in case something attacks her.

It feels like time drags, now that she is once more physically present in a reality affected by the passage of time. Hours must have passed since she first enters what she now suspects is some kind of tunnel.

The smell gets worse the further she goes, as if she's heading towards the source, rather than away from it, which is concerning, because it is triggering words like 'death' and 'danger' to flash in her mind, everything screaming at her to get away from it before she dies to contribute to it.

Just when she thinks she might possibly be lost in a never-ending tunnel, Eleven practically falls into a huge cavern, only just lit by some sort of opening so far up in the roof she can't even see it, ghostly green light filtering down, touching off strange shapes and creating awful shadows in the gloom. A great, hulking pile of rotting stuff looms up from the middle of the cavern, all of it dripping with stagnant water and mildew, and there are *things*, disgusting misshapen *things*, floating lazily in the air so dense with the repugnant smell that Eleven is sure that is what is holding the unidentified things off the ground. And then she sees... *it*. Horrible, horrible *it*, all twisted and curled in on itself, all slimy skin and too many limbs and a thousand screaming faces etched into its sides and back and everywhere Eleven can make out in the dark. Just looking at it makes her want to lay down and die, but she summons a picture of Mike and Will in her brain and edges slowly, slowly around the edge of the cavern. She can just make out an opening on the other side.

The monster in the cavern is asleep, deeply so, which is lucky for her as her shredded shoes crunch on tiny bones and squeak on slippery stones. She reaches the opening – the mouth of another tunnel – the monster rolls over, stretching, and its humongous mouth opens in a yawn. She sees a million teeth in a dripping mouth (*demogorgon, a GIANT demogorgan!*) and as a faint orange glow starts to shine, glinting off the teeth and the saliva and getting brighter, brighter, *brighter!*

Eleven screams, her hands instinctively raising to cover her eyes, and the sound bounces off every surface as she turns down the new tunnel and flees. There's that *zing* again, that one she felt in her *mind place* when she broke down the barriers between her and her mother, and between her and Will, and she's running faster than she has ever run in her entire life. She runs until she thinks her feet should be hurting, but they aren't, because her feet *aren't even touching the*

*stones*. Is she flying? -or has she managed to levitate herself? Eleven doesn't know, and she doesn't care to stop and figure it out.

When she sees the pale, white light of day blooming up ahead of her, so many seconds-minutes-hours later, Eleven cries with relief, sinking out of the air and fumbling her way to the end of the tunnel on shaking legs, emerging into a larger, metal-walled tunnel that doesn't smell anywhere near as bad as the rest of the ones she has dragged herself through. There are long, stringy plants slithering down the walls and clogging up the already filthy brown water puddling on the floor, and she has to pinch herself to remember that they're some sort of Earth plant, not the *Upside Down's* vines, come to drag her back there. She has been in the dark maze of tunnels – and the pitch black of her *mind place* before that – for so long that when she finally reaches the mouth of the tunnel, the bright sunlight beyond it stings her eyes, forcing her back a step as she tries to use her shoulders to block the light out.

Peeking through her lashes until she can make out green shapes that eventually sharpen into trees, Eleven pulls herself out of (*the big ol' Derry sewer system*) tunnel and into a small creek strewn with small pebbles and large boulders, overgrown on one side with twisted old trees and ratty shrubbery, a few fallen logs wedged into the bank like seats. Eleven wades over and tentatively sits on one of the logs, careful of it coming loose and dashing her against the rocks lying under the water. “Let’s see...” she breathes, her face going slack at the sound of her own voice. She might not speak very regularly, but what comes out of her mouth is barely the shadow of a whisper, raspy and sticking to the back of her tongue. “Mike,” she tries, the ‘mi’ coming out fine, but her throat seizing on the harsher end of the word. She says it over and over until it almost stops sounding like a real word, and then she catches sight of herself in the reflection of the water.

Blood dripping from her nose isn’t an unusual sight, Eleven merely wiping it off on the back of her wrist as she rakes her eyes over everything else. Thick curls tumble from her head, dull and matted together, covered in the same brownish-reddish-purplish slime that coats the rest of her. Suddenly disgusted, Eleven sets the paper and her radio out of harm’s way, and strips off her saturated flannel shirt

before splashing fully into the cold water, mindful of the rocks, trying to scrub the remains of the Upside Down off her as best she can. The sun is starting to set by the time she's satisfied with her level of cleanliness, water cascading over her, her dress billowing around her like a pale, dirty parachute. No amount of scrubbing between two rocks was going to get the stains out of the material.

Sighing, Eleven leans back and floats in the shallow water, hot, happy tears running down her pink cheeks as she takes in the fact that she is *home*. Well, out of the Upside Down, at least. Now, all she has to do is find out where she is, radio Hopper, and wait for him to pick her up. *And then I get to see Mike again...* she thinks to herself, grinning madly up at the empty orange sky. Thinking about Mike sends another *zing* shooting through her body.

*“It’s day three hundred and twenty-nine.”*

Eleven flounders in the water, some of it trickling into her mouth as she exclaims, “Mike?” in shock. She can’t have fallen back into her *mind place*, she just can’t! She’s still in the creek, still in her own reality, still free. But Mike is nowhere to be seen.

*“Will says he figured out how to get into his... what did he call it? Mind place. And that you found him there. He says you’re in the Upside Down, but you’re not at the same time.”* His voice is crackling out of the radio, she suddenly realises, scrambling for it, so focused on Mike she doesn’t even notice she cuts her shin on a rock. *“He says he can feel you in his head, and that you’re suddenly a lot closer than you were yesterday. I hope he’s right.”*

“I hope he is too,” Eleven says, turning the radio over in her hands. Blood from her nose drips onto her fingers.

“Hey, who are you talking to?”

Eleven nearly drops the radio in the creek, shrieking out loud, and whipping around. Someone is standing in the trees behind her, half hidden by the sagging branches and hanging leaves, twigs cracking as they start walking towards her. Narrowing her eyes, Eleven raises one hand to defend herself if necessary. Out of the undergrowth emerges... a child. Young, even younger than Eleven, who reminds

herself that she is only twelve (*thirteen now, Eleven, you were comatose during your birthday*) and he strolls forwards with all the swagger and confidence of a grown man, one hand wiping at something on his face, and the other in the pocket of his shorts. His hair is almost as wild and curly as hers, black in the shadows but turning almost red at the tips when the sun hits him. It is arguably cold, and Eleven has no idea what time of year it is, but she's shivering in her wet dress, and this child is wearing nothing but shorts, a spritely floral shirt, and the various bruises and band-aids littering his skin. Eleven lowers her hand. Surely this child, with his tiny hands and giant glasses, can't pose too much of a threat.

Annoyed at not getting a response, the child removes his glasses, cleaning the lenses snootily on his shirt as he regards her with big brown eyes. "Well, ah say, ah say, ah say!" he crows, voice sounding different to the first time he had spoken, like someone else using his mouth. "We appeah to have caught a mute!"

"M-mike?" Eleven stutters, frowning. With his glasses not marring half his face, the resemblance between this strange child and Mike is... eerie. Eleven feels like someone is playing a trick on her, trying to lure her into a trap, softening her up and lowering her guard with something that bares Mike's face.

"Who the hell is Mike?" the child asks, affronted, jamming his glasses back on his nose. One of the arms has white tape wrapped around it, and there's a yellowing bruise high on his right cheek. "My name is Richie, you've probably heard your mom screaming my name." Eleven can just tell the face she makes at that statement probably looks ridiculous. More tears might be welling up in her eyes. How would this... this *Richie* know anything at all about her Mama? "Oh." Richie's face turns a little soft around the edges, and he shuffles just a little closer, his small hands raised. Not defensively, just enough to make her think twice about hurting him. "I'm sorry, that was forward. I should wait until the third date to make mom jokes. I didn't mean to make you cry." He actually seems quite concerned, cartoonish magnified eyes tracking the few tears that escape the grasp of her bottom lashes.

Eleven scrubs at her cheek with her fingers, smearing blood everywhere. "Don't do it again," she says, petulance colouring her

voice.

“Pinkie swear,” Richie drawls, holding up the little finger of his right hand towards her. The tip is wrapped with medical tape, carefully cut and precisely lined up, and Eleven marvels at the fact that this child is apparently being held together with plasters and the weight of his glasses. “Yowza, you know how to leave a guy hanging, doncha?” He waggles his bandaged finger at her, his eyebrows raised comically over the scratched frames of his glasses, and he offers her an encouraging grin.

It’s too many new words for Eleven. “Yowza?” she repeats, sounding it out slowly. The ‘z’ makes her teeth buzz strangely. “Pinkie swear?” (*What is a pinkie and why is it swearing?*) “What is ‘pinkie swear’?”

Richie doesn’t seem at all concerned about the fact that, with just a few hours until night falls completely, he has stumbled across a strange girl taking a bath near an outlet pipe for the sewers, still all dirty and with blood streaking her face, and who clearly doesn’t understand half the words coming out of his mouth. “You’ve never seen a pinkie swear before?” he gasps theatrically. “Whah, you cuhntry folk got no idea how we run things in the big citeh!” He quickly realises that his silly voice is confusing her even more, and he closes the last of the gap between them completely, sitting noisily beside her on her log – mindful not to get water on her paper or her radio, however – and holds his little finger up again. “This is my pinkie,” he says, pointing at it. His little face is suddenly solemn, as if explaining a pinkie swear is an extremely important task. “You hook yours with mine, and that means we’ve made a pinkie swear.” His nose wrinkles a little (*so much like Mike it’s unnerving*) and he performs said action, snickering slightly when she jumps at his touch, not caring that there’s dirt and blood and slime caked in her nails. “There. It’s a promise, see?”

“Promise?” Eleven breathes, her eyes going wide. She understands that.

“Yeah!” Richie nods, perking up out of his serious demeanour, happy that she gets it. “I promise not to make any more jokes about your mom.” He pulls his hand away from hers and rubs at his nose idly. Quietly, he says, “I don’t really like people making jokes about my

mom either.”

Eleven frowns. “So why do you do it to other people?”

This earns her a bright beam as Richie kicks his feet in the water. He isn’t wearing any shoes, and there’s a cut on the top of his left foot. “Because I’m an asshole, of course!” he laughs, cutting himself short when he sees yet another confused look on her face. “Asshole? Like... oh my god, you have no idea what that means.” He adjusts his glasses studiously. “In that case, an asshole is the best person you’re ever going to meet, just like yours truly.” He puffs his chest out and taps it with both thumbs.

“Asshole,” Eleven repeats, nodding her head. This earns her another beaming grin from Richie, and it makes her heart hurt a little, because he really does look *just like Mike*. Richie has a big, red rash down one calf, and Eleven purses her lips, unusually worried about this loud, rude child she has only just met. “Hurt,” she says simply, gently prodding his scraped knee with the tip of her finger. “What happened?”

Richie is a little taken aback at the subject change, just enough that he scrambles for something witty to say – a skill he will eventually refine into an artform, Eleven will find out several years down the track when their paths unexpectedly cross again – however, he is saved from responding this time by a loud shout of, “RICHIE?” and the sound of crashing feet heading towards them. “RICHIE WHERE ARE YOU?”

“Shit,” Richie whispers, his knees knocking together anxiously. “DOWN BY THE BIG PIPE, STAN!” he yells back, snorting when Eleven draws back from him in shock at the volume of his voice. “Sorry,” he says with a small shrug. “That’s my best friend. He must have noticed I snuck out.”

Another boy flies out of the bushes, arms waving wildly to keep the leaves and twigs from getting tangled in his hair as he barrels towards Richie. It’s like he doesn’t even see Eleven as he seizes Richie by the shoulders and starts inspecting him – Eleven thinks that if he’s looking for injuries, he might be a little bit blind because Richie is covered in them – breath hitching slightly until he’s satisfied with

whatever he has seen, and then he lets out a sigh. “You scared me,” he snaps, flicking Richie’s temple before flinging his arms around the shorter boy in a big hug. “Asshole.” He continues to hug Richie and fuss over him until Richie starts whining in a high-pitched voice, pawing at his friend’s back until he is released. “What are you doing down here, it’s almost dark?”

“I’m starting a secret cult with my new friend-o here,” Richie says smartly, gesturing to Eleven with a flick of his hands. “Do you wanna join, Stanley-boy?”

Stanley-boy, or ‘Stan’ as Richie had referred to him earlier, finally turns his attention to Eleven. Where Richie is a banged-up mess of mismatched colours and too-big everything, this boy is neatly held together, his pale pink shirt pressed beyond even the perfection Eleven had witnessed in the Wheelers’ house, a soft cream cardigan pulled low over his fingers, and the legs of his shorts rolled up the exact same length on each side. His eyes are blue, his hair is gold, and his entire face goes pale when his gaze lands on her. An anxious left hand reaches out and grabs onto the back of Richie’s over-shirt, trying to tug him out of the creek. Richie swats him off, flailing on the log before righting himself.

“This is Stan the Man,” Richie announces proudly to Eleven, who just nods again, unsure of what to say. “Stanley is the world’s smallest adult, but we try not to hold that against him.”

Stan hisses, “*Richie*,” and latches onto Richie’s shirt again, his wide, fearful eyes never leaving Eleven’s face. “Richie, stop harassing the strange girl all covered in blood.”

“Shush Stan,” Richie soothes him, patting the back of Stan’s hand. “Don’t be mean to my new friend, I’m teaching her about pinkie promises, and I’m telling her all about what I did with your mom last – hey!” He squawks indignantly when Stan hauls him off the log with a sudden bout of strength. “Oi! Just because you’re a year older than me doesn’t mean you get to throw me around like a ragdoll.”

“Who is she?” Stan whispers over Richie’s protests, gently pressing his fingers into the insides of Richie’s elbows to get him to focus on how serious he is being. “Richie, *where did she come from?*”

Eleven watches the small exchange curiously, still perched on the bank of the creek with her radio and folded paper, the soggy, slimy flannel wadded up beside her. She should probably wash that too. There is... something about these boys, different for each. Richie might have Mike's face, making her stomach swoop and her palms sweat, but Stan, seemingly unremarkable, makes her feel that swooping sensation all over, in her head, in her chest. It's not unlike the feeling she got the first time she connected with Will in her *mind place*. Stan clearly feels something akin to that towards Eleven, and he is trying to communicate that to Richie as best he can. "Who are you?" he asks Eleven directly after a few minutes of repetitive, joke-laden back-and-forth with Richie, who seems intent on being as obtuse and unhelpful as possible, if the grin on his face is anything to go by.

"Eleven," she replies, Stan's oddly calculative gaze unnerving her slightly. He carries himself in a way that suggests he knows more than he ought, can see more than he should, and understands more than any other boy his age could. Anxiously, he plays with the cuff of his cardigan's left sleeve, still locked in an intense stare-off with Eleven, broken only – characteristically – by Richie, sick of being left out of whatever is happening between his friend and the strange girl.

"He asked yer name, lassie, not yer age!" he barks, in yet another voice that makes Eleven's head spin.

Stan elbows Richie. "That is her name, dick," he snaps (*how does Stan know that?*) latching onto Richie's wrist and trying, once again, to drag him away. "Come on, it's almost dark, and you know my parents will flip out if we don't get back soon!"

"Aye, your mom will miss me too much!" Richie snickers.

"Beep-beep," Stan growls, (*beep-beep, you little shit this is a serious situation!*) actually putting more effort into pulling Richie's arm. "This is not the time, come on!" He grunts, tugging hard in an effort to get Richie to *listen to him for once in his damned life*, and his foot slips on the wet leaves coating the bank. It's like a sad, two-person domino chain, both boys careening down towards the creek and its bed of sharp rocks with their arms and legs getting all tangled. Eleven reacts instinctively, her hand coming up before she has even registered

moving it, just as Stan is shrieking, “FUCK, RICHIE WATCH OUT!” and both boys freeze mid-fall, Richie’s face inches from the surface of the water.

Silence reigns, and Richie’s glasses slide right off his nose and land in the creek with a splash that feels like a gunshot, loud enough to deafen the three children. The boys have their arms wrapped around each other like that might save them from an extremely painful and damaging landing.

Richie starts shrieking, variants of, “*What the fuck?!*” tumbling out of his mouth as Eleven carefully turns them the right way up and settles them a few feet away from the water. She is completely shocked at how neatly she performs the task, and how unexhausted she feels, as previous attempts at such a feat (*pulling Mike from the edge of a cliff, her heart beating in her throat in absolute terror she was going to lose him before she could apologise*) have left her completely unconscious for several minutes. Reaching up to touch her nose reveals a single drop of fresh blood beading in her left nostril, easily wiped away to join the rest of the slowly drying mess on her face. The two boys remain motionless, staring at her with eyes so wide they both look like they’re wearing Richie’s thick-lensed glasses. As an afterthought, Eleven summons said glasses from the creek and hovers them in front of Richie’s face until he raises a shaky hand to pluck them out of the air, wordlessly settling them back on the bridge of his nose.

Even paler now than he was before, Stan suddenly croaks, “This is the longest he’s been quiet since he learned how to talk,” his voice like crushed paper.

It breaks the spell, Richie laughing so hysterically a few tears drip down his bruised and freckled cheeks. He manages something unintelligible, ending with, ‘a good one!’ before dissolving into laughter that seems harsh enough to hurt his thin chest. Stan, still ghostly pale and staring at Eleven like he has never seen a girl before (*never seen a girl like her before, no sir*) pats Richie robotically on the back until Richie calms down.

Darkness has almost completely fallen around them, shadows distorting in an uncomfortably familiar way that sends shivers down her spine, and Eleven can feel the nearly-dry material of her dress

getting itchy against her skin. She wants to go home. “Where am I?” she asks, bending to retrieve her radio and paper, finally unfolding it as she waits for an answer, eyes raking over all the little dots, lines, and letters covering the page. Hopper had called it ‘Morse Code’. Hopefully one of her new (*not quite friends, not yet, not for a very long time, but she doesn’t know the word ‘acquaintance’*) friends can explain to her what it means. She is ready to go home.

Richie, finally recovered from his laughing fit, says, an air of incredulity about him, “Why, you’re in Derry, of course. Derry, Maine – shittiest town in the United States!”

-

*Not until the girl has disappeared beyond the reach of Maturin’s senses do they realise the mistake they have made. For so long they have not had to guard a gateway – for all that the Maternalum is their natural enemy, she provides a useful service, her lair in the Between keeping the other dissidents of the Nether from venturing into the fresh, new world – and now they have abandoned the newly opened gateway to bring the child here. They know the human beings watch the new gate, that the child herself is the one who opened it, and therefore must be the one to close it, but the humans cannot guard the gate from what lurks in the depths of the Nether.*

*Deep in the darkness, where the shadows aren’t shadows, and even the stupid, half-formed creatures dare not roam there in their never-ending search for scraps of food, lies Ursupare, shapeless, ageless, and senseless. Countless times of the centuries of the Maternalum haunting the Between, Ursupare has fought her for its control, defeated each time when Maturin has stepped in to right the balance. And now, Maturin has left a weak, brand new gate open and defenceless for Ursupare’s taking.*

*Maturin no longer has the strength to fight Ursupare between realities as they once did. They must get back to the gate before he passes through.*

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If someone were to glance down the main street of Derry at half past eight that night, they would have been treated to the truly bizarre sight of three children, perhaps two brothers under the watch of their

older sister, making their way towards the police station. A closer look would dispel the family-friendly explanation, because despite the shared mop of curly hair between the three, the two boys are, in fact, Richard ‘watch your mouth or you’ll get a smack, boy’ Tozier, and Stanley ‘he’s such a nice child, if only he had more appropriate friends’ Uris, and the girl with them is neither a Derry local, nor a recognised import from one of the surrounding towns.

Richie is spear-heading their strange, three-person parade, marching confidently down the street with Eleven’s left hand gripped in his right, and Stan’s right held in his left. Eleven is (*bermused*) strangely entertained at this tiny boy dragging her along like his favourite pet, even though he now knows she has enough power in just one of her fingers to probably turn his brain to mush – and he never needs to know that that is something she has actually done to several real, live human beings before – while, on her other side, Stan is rigid with worry and more than a little bit of fear, doing his best to not accidentally brush Eleven’s arm as they are forced to walk side-by-side lest she hover him in the air again. He is also concentrating on making sure Richie doesn’t trip up, disturb someone, or get lost on the five blocks between where they are now and the police station.

“Why do you need a radio?” Richie asks, obnoxiously loud as always, impossibly twisting himself so he can walk backwards, his arms crossed over his chest so he didn’t have to let go of anyone’s hands as Stan mutters about his arm being yanked out of its socket. “Don’t you have a Supercomm?” He nods his head to indicate the radio sticking out of the pocket of Eleven’s flannel. Said flannel is one of the many reasons Stan is trying to avoid touching the mysterious girl, still streaked with dirt and slime even after Eleven had hastily dunked it in the creek.

Eleven shakes her head. “No signal,” she murmurs. She had tried it a few times as they boys had shown her out of the marshy area she had stumbled out into, a place they called ‘The Barrens’ and apparently spent a lot of time in, and she hadn’t been able to get it to connect, even when she was focusing her powers on it. It didn’t help that she wasn’t entirely sure how it worked, considering the only other time she had directly used one was to connect to Will when he was stuck in the Upside Down. “Need a police radio.” She knows that Hopper is

a policeman, and has his own radio. And she knows that if she can get her hands on a police radio, she can get in contact with him.

The closer they get to their destination, the more she wonders why there is no one but them out on the street. Watching the *tell-ah-vishon* in Mike's house taught her that there is a very active 'night life' in most American towns, and she's just a little disappointed that she isn't getting to experience it.

Huffing and tugging Richie's arm to turn him back around the right way before he trips over and damages all of them, Stan asks, "How exactly are you planning on getting your hands on a police radio?" He scratches the back of his neck with his free hand, cardigan slipping down a few inches, and Eleven catches sight of a dark bruise on his forearm that he quickly covers back up again. "All the police radios will be *with the policemen!*"

"Doan' be nah-eev, Schtanleh!" Richie hoots, shooting Stan a wink over his bony shoulder, his open floral shirt blowing out behind him like a pink and orange cape. "None of 'em ever 'ave their radios on 'em!"

Eleven quietly considers Stan's question as the bickering between the two boys grows louder and more heated, breathing out a quiet laugh to herself as they eventually devolve into a strange argument about the merits of high-slung gun-holsters by the time the three of them are standing outside the police station. It's just like being around Dustin and Lucas, so much so that she can almost hear the '*Does it matter?*' flying back and forth. There's a window a few feet away, and Eleven gently extracts her hand from Richie's and walks over to it, peering inside with a small frown of concentration. There is exactly one policeman inside that she can see, and he is asleep at his desk, feet propped up on a trashcan with a knocked-over cup of coffee dripping onto the floor beside him. His radio is falling out of the shoulder holder, and Eleven turns her attention to that.

Stan and Richie's argument – which has now, somehow, progressed to something about 'feathery birds' and 'fit birds' and the differences between them, which completely goes above Eleven's head – is interrupted by a harsh crack and a small hole exploding in the window beside them, a police radio floating out and landing neatly in

Eleven's outstretched right hand, her left coming up automatically to wipe the small drop of blood sliding towards her top lip from her nostril. "Radio," Eleven says brightly, smiling at the boys.

"Radio," Richie repeats, mouth hanging open. Stan just looks a little green, clutching at his own arm so tightly his knuckles are white.

"We should get back to my house," Stan whispers, shuffling back a few steps and nearly jumping out of his skin when his heels crunch on the broken glass. "Mom and Dad will be worrying about us – especially after you ran off like that!" He reaches out for Richie with both hands, looking determined to actually leave this time. "We've helped her find her radio, and now we should leave her be." When Richie stubbornly stays planted to the spot, Stan lets out a frustrated growl and *yanks* Richie away from Eleven. His eyes are flickering like he's seeing something the other two can't. "Let's go. We'll see her again later."

*We'll see her again later.* The words strike an odd chord with Eleven, who watches Stan finally wrestle Richie into walking away with a small frown on her face which is only alleviated by Richie throwing her a cheery salute that turns into an over-exaggerated wave, Eleven gladly returning the gesture until they disappear into the darkness. *We'll see her again later.* What does Stan mean? Does he think she will be staying in Derry for a little while? -or is he talking about some other time? Eleven decides not to think about it, sitting down on the pavement where she had been standing, and sending the glass away with a throwaway sweep of the hand not holding the radio. Blinking at the streetlamp above her until the light is bright enough for her to study her Morse Code. Stan had reluctantly explained how the code worked on their way to the station, and now she carefully points out each letter she needs.

Paper on the ground between her splayed feet, and the Supercomm crackling away in her pocket, Eleven holds the police radio with two hands and focuses on Hopper. The plastic starts to dent under her fingers as she grips it harder and harder, a drop of blood landing on the speaker before she feels it, the *zing*, and she knows that she's through to Hopper. Automatically, the thumb on the beeper starts tapping out letters.

D – E – R – R – Y – M – A – I – N – E – D – E – R – R – Y – M – A – I –  
N – E – D – E – R – R – Y – M – A – I – N – E – D – E – R – R – Y – M –  
A – I – N – E – D – E – R – R – Y – M – A – I – N – E

Over and over she taps out the phrase, hopping Hopper hears her. It takes fifteen minutes and Eleven is at the point where she thinks her thumb might fall off, stiff and sore and getting sluggish on the button, and then the radio starts to beep back.

O – N – M – Y – W – A – Y – S – T – A – Y – P – U – T

“On my way,” Eleven murmurs. “Stay put.” She taps back one word:  
P – R – O – M – I – S – E.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you all for reading this chapter! I hope it lived up to how much you all enjoyed the prologue! The next chapter, 'Goodnight Room, and the Red Balloons' will be uploaded on or around December 28th.

### **3. Chapter One: Goodnight Room and the Red Balloons**

#### **Summary for the Chapter:**

“El, I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” Mike tells her, trying not to let frustration leak into his voice. She doesn’t deserve that, not after everything she’s been through. “You need to help me understand,” he pleads, dropping a light kiss on her forehead the way he sees Will do in the mornings sometimes, both of them soft-limbed, and sleepy-eyed. “What did you run away from?”

“It,” El squeaks, her breath hitching as she curls in impossibly closer to Mike, quivering with all the emotions warring inside her as she picks at her blue cloth bracelet, undeserved shame radiating off her. “I ran away from It.”

#### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Yet again, here's a chapter an entire day early! Do NOT expect that to be a regular occurrence, I promise that it's an absolute fluke. We are finally into the main story - and there's been a time jump between the previous chapter and the current chapter, so keep an eye on the dates.

#### **Chapter One: Goodnight Room, and the Red Balloons**

#### **October, 1988**

*Normal nights in a not-so normal town are hard to come by, and are not to be trusted when too many of them happen in a row. Mike Wheeler lives by that thought. He breathes that thought. And because of that, he is not particularly surprised when, on a perfectly calm evening at the start of October, when the weather is neither here nor there, and nothing out of the ordinary has happened for nearly three weeks (and even then, that was just something weird going on with the TV reception) he gets woken up in the middle of the night, almost being crushed as Will and El*

*jolt upright at the same time, forgetting that Mike had been contentedly curled up between them. He complains, of course, whining and rubbing his shoulder where El had clipped him with her elbow, and pouting at Will for sitting up and dislodging Mike's head from where it had been lying on Will's chest, but ultimately, he is more concerned than annoyed. Not that stops him grumbling at them like a disgruntled kitten.*

*Unlike when this usually happens – fitting three rapidly growing, overly-affectionate teenagers into one relatively small bed is no easy task, especially after Will's ridiculous growth spurt leaves his feet dangling off the end of the mattress – Mike is ignored. In fact, beyond Mike's quietly rasped questioning, "Guys?" as his head sways from side to side heavily, no one says anything at all. The lights are all pulsing faintly, all their furniture hovering an inch or two off the ground.*

*Mike feels like he might actually be lying in bed with statues, and he curses when he realises that he can't reach the bedside lamp around El, her white cotton sleep shirt a bright spot in the soft darkness of the cabin, for fear of knocking her completely out of bed. He's a little afraid that they aren't even breathing, and then Will sucks in a sharp, shuddery breath, turning his head – Mike can see his eyes flashing – to stare at El. "You had it too?" he asks, voice croaky with sleep, even though he has to already know that they had the same dream. Again.*

*"Yes," she breathes, her legs curling up by her side slightly as she shifts on the mattress, sheets pooled around her thighs.*

*More than used to moments like this, Mike quietly pulls himself up to sit too and idly takes one of their hands in each of his, helping to breach the gap by linking their fingers together in his lap. He likes to sleep between them, tucked in the middle because it's a physical way of reminding himself that they're both still there with him, their arms secure around him, but he knows that sometimes Will and El need to remind each other of that, too. They breathe together in silence for a little while, and Mike nearly dozes off again, listing to one side with his hip pressed against Will's and his head dipping down onto El's collarbone before someone speaks.*

*"Do you think it was real?" El asks, turning to sit her chin delicately on top of Mike's curly head. "Or was it a dream?"*

*Will leans over too, his stomach warm and firm against Mike's ribs, nose brushing Mike's temple as they hold him between them again, just the way Mike likes it. "Felt real," Will whispers into Mike's hair. "I could feel the water on my skin."*

*"Me too," El murmurs.*

*"What happened?" Mike asks, not expecting or demanding an answer, just putting out the option to talk if either of them wanted to. He nuzzles further into El's shoulder, tugging Will's hand to realign him so his knees aren't jabbing into Mike's hip and thigh. He feels Will and El exchange looks in the shadows, having one of their silent conversations. Mike lets out a sleepy yawn.*

*Lying back down and bringing the boys with her – Mike still attached to her side and Will brought down by Mike by extension – El says, "There was a boat made of paper, and it was floating on the road. I saw a signpost–"*

*"Jackson Street and Witcham," Will breathes, curling his arm low around Mike's hips as he settles against him properly, twisting his fingers in the hem of Mike's shirt. "The boat went down the drain."*

*Silence falls again, Hopper's snores from the next room over reaching them suddenly. Once again, Mike feels himself slipping back into sleep, before El breaks the spell.*

*"The monster caught it."*

*Awful coldness sweeps over Mike's body, and he reluctantly pushes Will off to sit up again, eyes wide and worried. "What?"*

*"It was just a dream," Will tries to reassure Mike, cupping Mike's face and bringing him down to kiss his forehead, and El's hands join in, pulling Mike back into the warmth of the mattress and their embrace as she drops her own kiss to the corner of Mike's lips. "Nothing to worry about."*

*Mike groans, wanting to find out more about this maybe-real, maybe-dream thing, but his desire to go back to sleep wins in the end. "Don't say that," he grumbles as he lays down again, burrowing into the pillow and letting Will and El wrap him up in a tangle of arms and legs. "When you*

*say that there's nothing to worry about, there is always something to worry about."*

"You sound like Dustin," El tells him, and Mike giggles, his nose against her shoulder as Will's ankle slides between Mike's feet, stretching his arm over Mike to hook his fingers with El's. The lights turn off one by one, and there is a series of soft thumps as all the furniture returns to the floor, Will and El both falling asleep again.

*An hour later, Mike is the one who snaps awake, staring straight up to the ceiling in the dimly lit room, dawn starting to peek through the curtains. Will has rolled onto his front, dragging half the blankets with him. "Jackson Street and Witcham," Mike says slowly, quietly, voice hazy and slightly awed. He hopes he doesn't wake the other two. "Jackson Street and Witcham... Why does that sound so familiar?" He can hear a voice in his head, swimming up to the surface from a lake of still water, be it a memory, or a dream.*

'You be careful playing by the storm drains, Michael. There's one on the corner of Jackson Street and Witcham, I know you and the boys from school like to play marbles over there. I don't want to hear any stories about anyone falling inside trying to catch a stray one, do you understand?'

"Yes, mom," he whispers to the voice, eyes already growing heavy again. "We'll stay away from the storm drain..." And Mike turns on his side, back pressed to El's chest as he throws his arm over Will's lower back, sleep settling over him once more.

*They forget the dream until the following night rolls around, the three of them spread out on the Byers' living room floor with nearly every blanket and pillow in the house around them, all of them wrapped up in Mikes' sweaters and hand-knitted socks from Joyce. The dream returns, slightly different from the night before, but no less intriguing. Will says he sees a crumbling old house with crumbling old swings in the garden, and El adds that she saw a crumbling old basement and a crumbling old well. It makes every hair on Mike's body stand on end, that voice in his head – his mother's voice – calling out.*

'The floor. Nancy fell through the floor... The well is still down there!'

June, 1989

Warm air breezes through the empty hallways, whistling over the edges of broken glass and blowing the plastic sheets hanging from the walls around gently. The shell of Hawkins Laboratory almost feels safe when it is as empty as this, all the bodies gone, all the blood mopped up, and the gates bolted shut. Almost feels like it could have once done something good. Almost. Mike isn't fooled. He shoves his bolt-cutters back into his bag and sets his steely eyes ahead. The dust floating in the sunbeams and the bleach stains on the wall are an all-too eerie reminder of what this place used to be. What it used to house.

They don't need their torches, the sun doesn't set for several more hours, but the familiar weight of it in Mike's hand is comforting as the party edges their way across the main foyer. He tries not to think about what happened the last time he was in this building, the past four and a half years feeling like too long ago to still be affecting him, and not nearly long enough to erase the memories. Will's horrible screams (*HE'S LYING HE'S LYING HE'S LYING*) still haunt Mike's nightmares, waking him up gasping for breath and groping across the mattress to touch Will's face, dragging up the fear and pain from that night with them. Mike doesn't want to think about any of it. They're here to find answers to their current problem, not reflect on their old ones.

The clattering of small wheels on linoleum floor shocks Mike enough to rid him of the crushing thoughts, and he shakes his head, realising that while he had stopped walking, eyes fixed on a particularly large bleach stain (*he can still hear Joyce's heart-shattering screams, can remember his own pain at losing one of the AV Club's own*) in the middle of the floor, the rest of the party was nearly at the elevator. Max is streaking back towards him on her shiny new longboard – courtesy of Lucas' weekend job and his desire to give his girlfriend everything wonderful under the sun – and Mike makes that fondly annoyed face at her Will insists isn't as threatening as Mike thinks it is. "Really, Zoom-ass?" he intones as she circles around him slowly, fiery braid looped over her shoulder. She laughs, and Mike cracks a smile, taking her offered hand and stepping up on the back of the board, letting

her carry him over to the others.

“Final stop, Paladick,” Max announces cheerfully as they reach the others. “Everyone off.” She has never set foot inside the lab before, but she remembers that night too, when they rescued Mike and a comatose Will from the fortress of a building, and she can see it taking a toll on the rest of her friends, so she takes it upon herself to lighten the mood. Mike lets out a small huff of amusement as he steps off the board, so Max counts that as a win while Lucas helps her strap the board back up to her backpack.

Standing close to each other, the backs of their hands touching softly, Will and El are glancing around with matching apprehensive expressions on their faces, half-listening to Dustin as he rattles off the plan, and half-thinking about everything they had experienced in this building. Their eyes are slightly glazed, and Mike knows they’re talking to each other in that special way they have that doesn’t require words, but also doesn’t require submerging them both in salt water. He walks up to them and gently touches Will’s chest with one hand and El’s cheek with the other, not wanting to scare them, but needing them both to be present and alert. “Welcome back,” Mike says when they break apart from each other, blinking rapidly. “Are you guys okay?”

Will rests his elbow on Mike’s head, his grin not quite reaching his eyes. “Always,” he insists, leaning down to cut Mike’s follow-up question off with a kiss to the corner of his mouth. Mike scowls at him, looking ready to argue. He gets interrupted by El this time, her lips pressed to the other side of his mouth, and he bats them away indignantly.

“Stop ganging up on me when I’m worried!” Mike whines, turning to the others for back up, only to find the three of them trying to hide smirks and sniggers behind their hands. “Oh sure, laugh it up.” He flips them off with an eyeroll. You’d think that, as the eldest party member, Dungeon Master, and oft-declared leader of the party, they’d show him a little respect, but no. At least he knows they love him. “Let’s get on with it, this place is making my skin crawl. I’m going to have to shower to get rid of this feeling.”

Dustin jostles the large pile of rolled-up maps and blueprints he

‘liberated’ from the library, the school, and possibly the police station over the past several years. Let no one say that Dustin Henderson is not committed to his plans. “First things first, we need to go down to the basement and turn on all the interior lights.” He waves his free hand at all the windows surrounding them, and the midday sunlight pouring in. “The majority of this building doesn’t have access to the natural lights, and it’ll be a lot better than wasting the torch batteries.”

“You didn’t bring spare batteries?” Lucas exclaims, flicking Dustin’s shoulder with the backs of his fingers. “They were on your list of supplies!”

“And a taser was on yours, but I don’t see you hiding one of those in your tool belt,” Dustin counters, poking his tongue out at Lucas, who throws his hands in the air while Max dissolves into giggles beside him.

Mike decides to intervene before it gets ugly, making a face at Will and El that he hopes conveys his deep-seated fond annoyance at their other friends. “Dustin, you know Lucas doesn’t own a taser, stop putting it on his list for things,” he says, cuffing the back of Dustin’s hat so it dips down over his eyes. “How do we get down into the basement?” Dustin thrusts one of the blueprints at Mike while he fixes his hair and hat, grumbling. “Right, thanks,” Mike mutters, unrolling it and starting to peruse the different routes to the basement. He tilts it a little when El’s chin settles on his shoulder, her small, strong hand appearing to point something out to him. “That way?” He trusts her sense of direction implicitly, especially in this place.

“That way,” she confirms.

Max and Lucas have to take the door into the stairwell off its hinges, the lock splintered and jammed shut, Max’s tools flashing gold in the sunlight as she unbolts everything and then scoots out of the way while Lucas removes the heavy wooden panel like it weighs nothing. El takes it off him, setting it down carefully out of the way before taking the lead and starting to walk down the stairs.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Will and Mike yelp at the same time, nearly

crashing into each other as they rush after her. “El!” Mike calls, untangling himself from Will and then grabbing his hand, the two of them disappearing down the stairs. “We talked about this – don’t walk head-on into dangerous situations by yourself!” his voice echoes up to the others.

“I’m following Paladick before he blows a gasket and cries,” Max announces, pocketing her screwdriver and setting off, her board bouncing on her back with each confident step. Not wanting to be left behind, Dustin and Lucas scramble after her, their shoes clattering on the polished stairs and the sound echoing around them.

The basement looks like something out of a video game, walls of large computers and a maze of cords and wiring snaking around the floor. El is hovering by the door, seemingly hesitant to go any further, all of her earlier confidence leaking out in the face of the dimly lit unknown. Even Max seems unwilling to actually set foot onto the floor, one of her hands wrapping around Lucas’ arm when he appears next to her. Mike clicks his torch on and shines the beam around, first lighting up the glass screens, then the hulking generators with their dead lights and burnt out switches, and then the snaking cables waiting to trip them up with one wrong step. “Think we’ll actually be able to get the lights turned on?” he asks quietly, his heart rate suddenly picking up. He feels like he’s fourteen years old again and arguing with Hopper about if he speaks Basic.

Sombreness settles over the party, the daunting task ahead of them – not just turning on the lights, but everything else they have to do in the lab – looming in front of them like a giant, tangible beast to fight.

“I got it,” Will says quietly, taking the first step into the room. El squeaks and Mike makes to dash after him, but something holds them back as Will makes his way over to the fried generators, deftly picking his way across the floor. He slowly raises both hands and presses his fingers lightly to the cold metal, green eyes wide with concentration. *Zing.* Breathing turning laboured, a small drop of blood rolls out of Will’s nose, and the lights around them flicker on, wavering slightly before staying bright, humming in the silent basement. Will grunts, digging his fingers into the metal casing as it bows underneath the supernatural pressure, and the computers whir to life. The party watches as green writing starts appearing on the old

screens, typing itself out as Will turns on the rest of the building lights, and the security cameras for good measure. “Oh,” Will sighs, finally pulling back. A perfect impression of his hands is stamped into the metal casing. His cheeks are flushed as he wipes his nose on the back of his wrist, his eyes alight. “That was a rush.”

El snorts, a hand pressed to her forehead, having felt it herself. “Tell me about it,” she agrees, stumbling to meet him as he walks back to the party. Will bumps his forehead against hers, kisses her cheek twice, and slings his arm around her shoulder. “Mike,” El demands, and Mike is helpless to resist that tone, tucking himself under Will’s other arm and wrapping his own arms around El’s waist, relishing every second he gets to spend with these two people he loves more than anything in the world.

“Oh, Jesus,” Dustin mutters, not unkindly. “They have the worst timing.”

“Leave them alone,” Max admonishes him.

Mike ignores his friends and breathes, “That was *awesome*, Will!” tilting his head back slightly to kiss Will.

“Proud of you,” El chimes in, smiling brightly with her cheek squished against Will’s shoulder.

“Thanks,” Will mumbles shyly, still not used to showing off his abilities, which aren’t usually as physically *there* as El’s are. He pulls away from the two to push his hair back and address Dustin, who has dropped his fake annoyance and is smiling at them toothily. “The lights should stay on until I turn them back off, but I might have missed a few right in the middle of the building.” He shrugs self-deprecatingly. “I thought maybe I could stay in the control room on the fourth floor while everyone splits up to look around? You know, in case something happens.” He waves back at the computers, code still flashing across the screens. “I can connect the PA system to the Supercomms so we can all stay in touch better.”

Dustin looks briefly like he’s going to protest, insist that all six of them are going to need to search the lab, but then he realises what Will is doing: giving himself an out, to keep himself sane in the place that

nearly killed him several times over. “Good plan, William,” he says studiously. “Will the Wise strikes again.

“Please don’t ever call me William again,” Will groans, grabbing Mike’s hand and dragging him back to the door, El clinging to Mike’s arm for the ride. Laughter rings up the stairs from each of them at the disturbed look on Will’s face. “Off we go, then,” he mutters, a tiny grin appearing on his face.

“Does everyone know what they’re looking for?” As they’re climbing back up the stairs, Dustin runs through the plan one more time, wanting to smooth out any wrinkles (*and make up for the fact that Will has pulled out*) and answer any questions. “Lucas, Max, and I are trying to find the archives, or the filing room, or wherever the records of this place are. We know from Hopper and Steve that most of the old records were left here when the building was shut down, in the hopes they would be destroyed during demolition.”

Lucas grabs one of the maps off Dustin, stuffing it into Max’s backpack for safe keeping, even as she complains that he’s throwing her off balance. “But then the demolition was delayed, and so it should all still be here, because no one has been in, or out, of the building since.”

“Exactly,” Dustin says. He pauses to scratch his nose before continuing. “We want to find out what happened to the other kids here, where they came from, and if any of them are still alive, besides El and Kali.” He turns his head, questioning look on his face. “Mike, El..?”

“We’re going down to where the gate was,” Mike recites obediently, now holding El’s hand as they walk just behind Will up the stairs. “To see if Will and El’s weird dreams are coming from it if it’s somehow open again, or from somewhere else.” Will was supposed to come with them, but Mike – and especially El – understands why he has bowed out. “If the gate is still closed – hopefully it is - we’re looking for whatever else is causing this.”

Dustin nods his head, satisfied that everything should go according to plan. The building is empty and there shouldn’t be anything lurking in the shadows to surprise them. Hopefully They reach the foyer

again, and they file out of the stairwell and back into the brightly lit room, the fluorescent lights now glowing in the ceiling. With Will controlling as much of the power as he can, he's confident that all the elevators should work now, not just the one El was planning on manning. El, Max, and Lucas put the door back into place, leaving no evidence of their presence in the lab an integral part of the plan, in case someone comes snooping after them. As Max is fixing the hinges back up, a strange sound starts up in the distance.

"What the hell is that?" Mike asks, head whipping around, his spine icing over like someone upended a bucket of fear on his head. "Is that coming from inside the building?!"

Will, standing by the window after going for a wander as he feels out the electricity in the air, suddenly says, "Guys, I think we might have a problem..." in a halting voice. He points out into the remains of the carpark. A police car is speeding recklessly up the drive towards the lab, sirens blaring and lights flashing. "Shit," he curses as the others sprint to crowd around the window with him. "Is that Hop? Did he know we were coming?"

"Not Dad," El confirms, fingers wrapped around Will's left wrist comfortingly.

The car screeches to a stop just outside the big double doors, and the six teenagers watch with wide eyes and baited breath as the driver's door is thrown open. Officer Harrington leaps out and stomps up to the lab, bursting through the door in dramatic, frazzled concern. "Attention, little shits," Steve yells, spotting them and storming over, his eyes flashing. "Next time you decide to *illegally enter* an ex-government facility that is marked for demolition, how about you inform your friendly local police friend so that he can turn the alarms off for you!"

A noise like a boiling kettle bubbles in Mike throat as he turns slowly to Dustin, Steve leaning over them with his hands on his hips. "Dustin!" Mike hisses. "You were supposed to make sure the alarms were off! That was step one of the plan!"

"Oh, there's a plan!" Steve exclaims sardonically, throwing his hands up in the air in exasperation. The teens all wince. "I leave you

dipshits alone for a week while I'm on a case, and you start breaking and entering!" He sighs, runs his hands through his hair, and seems to calm down. "What the hell are you doing here anyway? Need I remind you that if *anyone else* came investigating the alarms, you'd all probably get arrested."

All six party members share loaded looks, trying to silently nominate someone to speak. They had agreed not to tell any of the adults just yet, not wanting to worry any of them after everything has been so good and peaceful for such a long time. Lucas shoves Will forwards after almost a full minute of them pointing at each other while Steve taps his foot, hoping that Will's innocent face and strong resemblance to his older brother might appeal to Steve's soft side and convince him to go easy on them with the inevitable worried yelling.

"Uh..." Will squeaks, shuffling his feet under Steve's intense stare. "We were... uh..." He gulps, glancing around shiftily, and then the words tumble out, so quickly even El has trouble following them, and she can hear them as Will thinks them. "We were checking to make sure the gate is still closed, because me and El have been having these *really weird* dreams and we haven't been sleeping, and there are all these scary shadows and people screaming and this little boy in a yellow raincoat and this thing with lots of teeth and—" Mike dives forwards and grabs Will's hand, shushing him quietly before he chokes on his own tongue. "Thanks, Mike."

Steve gapes at Will.

"Steve?" Dustin asks tentatively, afraid that they might have broken the junior officer.

"Could you repeat all of that, very slowly," Steve mumbles, still staring at Will.

Will scrubs the back of his neck uncomfortably, and El steps up on his other side, her hand on the small of his back encouragingly. "We came to check if the gate to the Upside Down is still closed," he starts.

"Right," Steve drawls, face calm and collected as he nods slowly. "Right, right, yes." His façade cracks, right eye twitching slightly,

which is their only giveaway right before he freaks out. “WHAT!?”

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Max’s skateboard wheels on the linoleum is the only sound as she, Lucas, and Dustin make their way along the main corridor on the third floor, Lucas propping the elevator doors open slightly with a stray plank of wood he’d found in the foyer, wary of them being trapped inside the building. One floor above them, Lucas knows that Will is keeping an eye on them from the control room, and he waves at a security camera he passes, pulling a face and hoping it makes his friend smile. The PA crackles, a small chuckle reaching them, and Lucas spares a wink for the camera before rushing to catch up with Max in case she zooms into something dangerous. “Guys, Steve said stick together!” Lucas calls out to Max and Dustin, voice slightly mocking, and their laughter reaches him before he reaches them.

*“I heard that,”* Steve’s voice snaps through Lucas’ Supercomm, and Lucas snorts. Steve is up on the roof, inspecting the call interception centres that caused so much damage, his police-issued shoulder radio connected to the PA and Supercomms, courtesy of Will, too. He had decreed that if they weren’t going to leave – he knew them *so well* – then he was just going to have to help.

“Sorry, Steve,” Lucas says, rolling his eyes at Max, who shakes her head and kisses his cheek. Lucas turns his head at the last second so she kisses him properly, and she starts giggling so hard she nearly falls off her board, a faint, ‘You’re so ridiculous,’ making its way out of her mouth. Grabbing her hand, Lucas heads off around the corner after Dustin, Max trailing behind him on her board with a bright grin on her face and a faint flush on her cheeks.

“Guys,” Dustin’s voice breaks the moment, which is his third best talent aside from making epic plans and being the most adorable person in the room. “Guys. Can we compare maps?” His voice sounds off, and Lucas and Max finally turn around to look at whatever has Dustin sounding worried this time – just twenty minutes ago, Dustin had been convinced he was going to die of radiation poisoning because he knocked over a metal canister, which turned out to be a government-issued fire extinguisher – and Lucas’ eyes go wide. “Yeah,” Dustin says, noticing the expression. “I’m pretty sure this

wall isn't supposed to be there." He reaches out and raps his knuckles against the plaster in front of him; the wall that is blocking off the corridor for no good reason. "Max has the blueprints from the early Sixties, what do they say?"

Kicking her board up and leaning it against a wall, Max rifles through her bag and extracts said blueprints, unfolding them and holding them up beside Dustin's map. "There's definitely more corridor behind that wall."

"Will," Dustin calls out, waving his hands at a security camera. "Will, you there?"

The PA hums. "*What do you need?*"

"You got eyes behind this wall?"

Tearing his eyes away from the screen he has been watching Mike and El's slow descent into the pit that used to be the home of the gateway into the Upside Down, Will drags the list of camera locations closer and starts trying to locate one behind the wall that seems to be effectively cutting the third floor in half. "Gimme a second," he says, spotting Dustin's tapping foot in the monitor. "Don't make that face at me, Henderson, I'm going as fast as I can." He thinks Dustin makes an unsavoury comment about Will watching Mike's ass instead of the party, but Will tastefully ignores it in favour of blinking at the monitors to swap the cameras around. Absently, he wipes his nose on the back of his sleeve, hoping Joyce doesn't get too frustrated having to get bloodstains out of the pale blue button up he's wearing. The words on the list swim until something jumps out at him. "I think I've found one," he says, blinking rapidly until he gets the right camera displayed before him. Will's eyebrows shoot up. "Dustin, Lucas, if you guys go about six feet further down the wall and put something through it, you'll come out into... well, it looks like some kind of nursery."

Max frowns, looking confused. "A nursery? Like, for plants?"

"No, for kids," Dustin says, making a 'what the hell?' face at her. "Who the hell thinks of *gardening* first when someone says 'nursery'?"

“I do. I *like* gardening,” Max snaps, her ears going pink under her hair. In her defence, Max has the most gorgeous patch growing in Lucas’ backyard full of bluebells and Russian sage, out of harm’s way from the more unsavoury people in her neighbourhood who don’t take too kindly to wayward teenaged girls, prone to keying her car and, once, egging her house.

“Oh my god,” Lucas groans, smacking a hand to his forehead comically as his girlfriend and best friend start arguing about gardening terms. “Will, is there anything else behind the wall?”

Will blowing out a puff of frustrated air is audible over the PA. *“I don’t know, the cameras have all been disabled. I’m trying to turn them on, but it’s hard work. I’m not as good at this as El.”*

“Shut up, you’re doing great,” Lucas assures him brusquely. “Nothing at all?”

“*Maybe...*” Will murmurs. *“There should definitely be more rooms, they’re on the maps. I just can’t see what’s in them.”* He makes a strange noise, high in the back of his throat. *“Maybe don’t go in them, I don’t like the idea of you going somewhere I can’t see.”*

Dustin declares his argument with Max over when she looks ready to bring her longboard into the equation, and he backs away slowly. “That should do for now, Byers. Top job.” He knocks on the wall where Will had told them, hearing the dull echo of an open space behind the plasterboard. “Right on the money.” He taps out the general shape of the door. “Alright, one solid kick should break through. Lucas?” He looks expectantly at said boy.

“Why should I do it?” Lucas asks, hand on his hip. “You do it.”

“Jeez,” Dustin says, full of faux-nerves, running his hand through his hair before settling his hat back on top of the curly mess. “If only I had a big, strong friend to kick in walls for me, so I don’t have to risk my poor, disease riddled bones solving a mystery.” Sarcasm drips off every word and he grins winningly at Lucas as his friend sighs and rolls his eyes, shooing Dustin out of the way and squaring up to the panel of wall he’s about to destroy. Lucas puts his foot through it easily, and Max helps him break the plaster away by hand. “Told you

so,” says Dustin, smugly.

Lucas puts a hand on Dustin’s back and shoves him through the hole into the dark, unknown room first, cheekily beaming at Max over the sound of Dustin’s shrieked, ‘Son of a bitch!’. “Ladies first, my dear,” Lucas offers with a mock bow.

Plopping her board on the ground and setting one foot on it, Max replies, “Age before beauty, *darling*.”

“God, shut up and get in here!” Dustin whines.

The lights turn on as soon as all three of them are inside, and someone mutters, “Thanks, Will,” as they stare at their surroundings in barely repressed shock. There are small beds lined up neatly against one wall, eleven in total, each barely four feet in length, their metal frames pressed together and the rubber-wrapped mattresses stacked beside them. Scraps on the tiled floor, the black streaks visible even under the dust coating, show where the beds had once stood. Mouldy blankets are balled up in one corner, and Max gags at the scent, pulling the collar of her shirt up over her nose to try and block it out. The white cotton is stained brown, and all three of them know that it is old blood dried to a hard crust over many years. Four crates are stacked by the door, two over-flowing with moth-eaten children’s clothes, white shirts and dark blue overalls, and the other two seem to have toys inside.

“Twelve,” Dustin says dully. “There are twelve drag marks on the floor, but only eleven beds.”

“El...” Lucas whispers. “They probably moved her bed out somewhere else when she was the last one left.” He backtracks a step and peels some more of the plaster away from the doorframe. Freed from its prison and no longer held up by dried and flaky tape, a yellowed drawing fluttered down and lands at Lucas’ feet. He picks it up and shows Dustin and Max, the wax crayon rainbow faded over the years. “We’re in the Rainbow Room,” he says. “This is where they kept the kids.”

Dustin casts a glance over the clothes in the crates. “What happened here?” No one wants to say that it looks like something nasty and

violent took place in this room.

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Max says, crouching beside the toy crate and running her fingers over the bald arm of a teddy bear hanging out of the side, her face drawn and sadness radiating off her. She’s still a little hazy on the details, doesn’t want to press Eleven to retell a story she has been forced to relive over and over, but Max knows enough. Bad, wicked things were done to her friend – and other innocent children – in the name of research. “Those beds are stacked in front of a cupboard, there might be something in there.”

Lucas and Dustin work together to move the three beds blocking their access to the door, and Max reaches into Lucas’ toolbelt to pull her lockpick out, the thin metal a familiar weight in her hands as she carefully manipulates the tiny pins until she hears a resounding click and she slides the picks free. All three of them are holding a collective breath, Max still knelt in front of the doors, and Dustin finally darts a hand forwards, fingers closing around the handle and tugging firmly. It takes a few tugs, the wooden doors swollen with age and humidity, but one eventually pops open with a crack and the protesting groan of rusty hinges, papers full of holes shooting out in a great heap.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Dustin chants, chasing after a few caught in their own air drift and heading for the door. “I hope these weren’t in any sort of order.”

Rooting through the papers still inside the cupboard, Max spots crumpled manila folders and assumes that they had once housed the mess on the floor before they were unceremoniously shoved spine-first into the cupboard, resulting in an avalanche for whoever next opened the door. Max also takes a leap in assuming that whoever put the folders there probably never intended for them to be seen again – why else would they be in a locked cupboard, in an abandoned nursery, hidden away behind a fake wall? – and she drags the folders out, squinting at the labels hastily scrawled across the bottom right corners. One of them is missing half its cover, and several others have the same foul brown stains as the sheets splashed over them.

“‘003, Advanced Hypermobility’,” she reads off one label, noticing a small string of numbers and letters underneath that could be a serial

number. The pages still inside have the same code in the margins. “Right. ‘012, Innate Clairvoyance’, ‘008, Psychic Visual Manipulation’, ‘011, Cellular Telekinesis’...” Max’s eyes bug slightly, raking over the creased photo sticking out of that particular file, and she calls to the boys as they attempt to sort pages into piles. “Guys, match up the serial numbers in the margins, I think these are session notes about the kids who used to live in this room.” She fiddles with the folder, snatching up the picture as it falls out and tucking it back inside, brushing her thumb over the title. “I think this is El’s... should we bring it back to her?” She thumbs at the folders. “Kali’s is here too.”

“Should we read them?” Lucas asks, already shuffling papers into the correct folders as Max hands them to him.

“Nope, no way,” Dustin says emphatically, rapidly shaking his head. “They’re hers. She should look at them first, in case there’s...” he swallows audibly, eyes dark and usually cheerful face deathly serious, “...anything in there she doesn’t want us to see.”

Between the three of them and twenty solid minutes of coughing up dust as they pass musty page after musty page back and forth, they manage to accumulate nine complete – as far as they can tell – files on the children once held in Hawkins Laboratory, and three more that had pages so well-worn and old that they had crumbled away completely in the back corner of the cupboard. Lucas carefully stashes El’s folder into his satchel to give back to her, and the rest are split between Max and Dustin’s backpacks, Dustin shrugging and opening his packet of crisps when it takes up too much space. He crunches on them obnoxiously as they do a final sweep of the room, frowning quizzically at Max as she stops by the toy crate once again, this time extracting a small, stuffed turtle from inside the top crate. It’s missing a fin and the material has been worn down to a dull green-grey, but Max puts it in her bag anyway.

“There was a picture,” she explains haltingly as they leave the room and piece the plaster back over the door, Lucas taping it back up with the clear packing tape he’s taken to carrying. “In El’s folder. She was cuddling the turtle...” Max goes red and her board thumps onto the ground, her right foot coming up to rest on it. “I don’t know, I thought maybe she’d like it.” Her lips curl downwards. “Shit, she’s

going to hate it. She's going to think I'm mocking her! God, Lu, untape the door, I'm putting it back-

Lucas wraps his hands around Max's waist and drags her away from the door, picking her up effortlessly to deposit her properly on the longboard. "Calm down, Max," he says, voice calming. "El could never hate you, you're her best friend. I think she'll be touched you thought of her like that."

Nose wrinkling at the naff-reassurance, Max shoves her hands in her pockets and kicks off, gliding away with her shoulders hunched. Lucas and Dustin share a 'what the hell?' look before setting off after her, back towards the elevator. As much as they want to explore the rest of the walled-off floor, they know it wouldn't be wise, or safe, to venture where Will can't see them on the cameras, just in case. Max is agitatedly poking the elevator button when the reach her, the doors refusing to open manually, even with the plank of wood holding them partially open. She's scowling at how slow the elevator is being, her board resting against her hip, and Lucas swoops down to kiss her cheek, smiling when she smiles. The door opens with an off-key ding, and they shuffle inside in peaceable silence, confident that they've found something useful.

En route up to the fourth floor to reconvene with Will, a stomach-lurching grinding noise echoes all around them and the elevator shudders violently. All three of them scream when it sharply drops a few feet before halting altogether, the lights flickering rapidly.

"Will?!" Dustin calls into his Supercomm, trading scared looks with the other two. "Will, you there, buddy? What the *hell* is going on?"

"Sorry, sorry," Will's hitching voice crackles back. "*I lost it for a second, I'm doing about a hundred things at once, and I've lost Steve.*"

Dustin's heart drops out his ass. "You *what*?!"

The can hear the PA system outside the elevator squealing with feedback, and the floor starts vibrating worryingly under their feet. "*I don't know, I don't know,*" Will almost wails. "*The cameras were working fine in the interception centres, and now they're gone! It's like something else has switched them off.*" He curses colourfully. "Fuck, I'll

*bring you guys up to the roof, you need to find out what's happening – I've completely lost his shoulder radio!"*

And with that, the elevator starts to move again, shooting up so quickly it knocks Dustin off his feet a little, Max catching his arm and righting him, her other hand braced on the wall behind her. Lucas looks a little queasy, inertia working against him as they rocket up to the top floor. They stumble out onto the roof in a little chain, hands gripping shirts and bag straps and the end of Max's braid as Will apologizes anxiously over the Supercomm for the rough ride. "*There should be four big shipping containers on the roof with you,*" he explains quickly. "*Steve was going into the one on the North-West side when I lost him.*" The three start heading in that direction after a quick consultation with Dustin's compass, and Will adds suddenly, "*Guys, hurry. I'm getting about a million different signals from El – she and Mike have found something down in the basement and it's throwing the both of us off – and I still can't get the cameras on the roof working, and I think Steve left his gun in the car!*" He sucks in a shuddery breath, trying to steady himself. "*I've got a really bad feeling about this.*"

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The sun beats down on Steve's back as he steadily crosses the roof from the second of four call interception rooms, and he wipes his brow on the back of his wrist, tossing his small bolt cutters in his other hand as he heads towards the next shipping container, hoping for something interesting as the first two had proven to be a bust. He salutes a security camera as he walks along a well-worn path jauntily, sure Will will see the gesture at some point, and he briefly touches the two rings on the end of the chain around his neck, hidden from the rest of the world by his blue uniform shirt. In the midday heat, Steve wishes he'd thought to change before haring off after the kids, the itchy cotton clinging to his skin uncomfortably. Grumbling, he stops and strips the button-up off, content to walk around in his pants, belt, and grey undershirt until he has to return to the station. His dreaded hat is still on his desk, although Steven thinks the damned thing belongs in the trash.

Stepping into the shadows of the shipping container, Steve neatly snips the padlock off the chain, setting it against the metal wall and looping the chain around his elbow for safe keeping. It takes a bit of

brute strength, but he eventually gets the door grinding open, wincing at the squeal of metal and concrete as the doors sag on their giant hinges and scrape against the rooftop. Bolt cutters in his belt and torch in hand, he ventures inside, eyes flicking around for any threats. Just like the other two, the container is almost empty, just a long desk from door to door, knocked over chairs, and wires protruding from everywhere where speakers and phones and receivers used to be. Steve meanders along the table, reading over the labels that are peeling off the wooden desk top – he had already spotted the Wheelers and the Sinclairs in the first container, and the Hendersons, Byers, and his own family in the second.

‘Hargrove’ jumps out at Steve from the middle of the desk, that particular label new enough to still be stuck down firmly, and his skin crawls. It’s been two years since that night, that December, when the snowfall had been so heavy that the crashed Camaro hadn’t been found for another three days after it hit the tree on its drunken race up the wrong side of the road, but Steve can still feel the fists on his skin, still carries the scar under his hair from Joyce’s china plate. Even before that, Susan had left Neil and changed her name back to Mayfield, but the memory was still there. Steve forces himself to keep moving down the desk. The ‘Hopper’ label is right down the end, folded in half accidentally and stuck on crooked.

Steve mentally declares this container no use, not spying any data storage or filing cabinets, and he turns on his heel to leave, ready to shut that final reminder of his own personal nightmare away forever. He is so close, so close to the door. The sunlight is touching his skin, the cool breeze ruffling his hair.

A phone rings.

Dropping his torch in shock, Steve spins back around to stare into the dark shipping container. All the phones on the desk were gone, so what the hell is ringing? His eyes skirt over the darkest corners, and there he spots it: another phone bolted to the wall at the other end of the container, bright red plastic casing caked with dust and flaking brown stains. Silence reigns, and then it rings again, the sound loud and overly-cheerful, a sprightly mechanic tune that echoes metallically in the confined space of the shipping container.

“Just leave it,” Steve whispers to himself, taking a few steps towards the phone. “Just turn around and leave it. It’s just a wrong number.” He chuckles, high pitched and strained. “Who accidentally calls the wrong number in an old, abandoned government facility?”

As Steve is having his debate with himself, walking ever closer to the other end of the container, the phone continues to ring. When he’s close enough to touch the phone, he reaches out and wraps his hand around it. Underneath the phone, where the cabling and wires disappear into the wall, another label is stuck and peeling. He presses the fold back with his spare hand, and the second his skin brushes the tacky paper, the door behind him slams shut, plunging the container into total darkness as Steve’s torch flickers out too. His heaving breathing is almost louder than the ringing phone as Steve slowly takes it off the hook and puts it to his ear. He knows he read the word ‘DERRY’ on the label.

“Hello?” It comes out like a sigh, wispy and shaking and Steve suddenly realises that he is *afraid*. “This is Officer Steven Harrington, why are you calling this number?”

A smug huff reaches him through the phone before the caller begins to speak. “*Officer* Steve, hey? Oh, how the mighty fall, *King*. Officer really is quite a step down, don’t you think?”

Steve’s blood runs cold, turning to ice in his veins as he tries to drop the phone and finds he can’t move his fingers. *That taunting voice...* It isn’t possible. “You-you’re dead,” Steve breathes out, his voice quivering as fast as his heart is thumping in his chest. “You’re dead, I saw your body on the autopsy table. You’re *dead*.”

“...Am I?”

There’s a horrid thud as Steve’s knees buckle and hit the floor, the hand not holding the phone fisted against to wall in an effort to offer himself some meagre form of support as every nerve in his body seems to crackle with fearful energy. It *hurts*.

“Tell me Steve, does *this* sound like I’m dead?” Billy whispers in his ear, and a scream warps its way out of the phone, thin and familiar, calling out Steve’s name. Steve’s entire world stops, leaving him

feeling like every single one of his organs has fallen out or turned to mush. “Can you hear her, Steve? Hear her pain?”

“Nancy...” Steve moans, and she screams again, abruptly cut off with a strangled yelp, like Billy’s unoccupied hand has wrapped tightly around her throat. “Don’t... don’t hurt her. Please...”

“Please *what*, Harrington?” Nancy is crying now, Steve can hear her, each sob a needle pricking his skin. “This is your fault, you know?” Billy sounds so *blasé*, like he isn’t choking the life out of an innocent woman (*Steve’s rock and equal most important person in his life*) as he speaks. “You ran off to mother those queer little shits and left them all alone. It really was just too much of a temptation to pass up.”

Steve heaves in a gasp of air, curled up tightly against the wall in the dark, mentally yelling at himself to hang up the phone on the phantom that can’t possibly be on the other end. “Them?”

“Oh, I forgot to mention that Jonathan was here too!” There’s a dull thump, eerily like a foot smacking into a stomach (*Steve should know, he’s had enough feet kicked into his stomach to recognise the sound*) and it is followed by a pained groan, and a wet cough. “Little Johnny is a bit worse for wear right now, so he can’t come to the phone.” A hand slaps skin sharply and Jonathan *whines*, Nancy rasping his name with a voice that sounds like it’s taking her last breath.

Beside himself, Steve pleads, “Stop, stop hurting them!” Jonathan is wheezing heavily down the line, and Steven can feel his heart thumping in his chest, in his neck, in his fingertips in time with every gurgling heave. He hates that he can picture it *so clearly*, as if he was there too. Beautiful Nancy wearing a necklace of violent bruises, blue veins popping out like spiderwebs on her face around her bloodshot eyes as she gasps for life on the floor at Billy’s booted feet, her slim hand, strong from her shooting, reaching out for Steve, who *is not there* to help her. He can see Jonathan, all the strength of a hurricane packed into his long, lanky body, curled up to protect himself from the hard kicks reigning down on him, blood splattering the ground under his head as it drips from his mouth in thick, sticky strings. “Please...” Steve’s voice cracks, tears running down his cheeks. “Please stop hurting them.”

“Why should I?” Billy taunts, and then something snaps, Nancy shrieking awfully. Steve screws his eyes up, hand on the wall moving to clench at his hair before dropping down to those rings he wears around his neck, pulling so tightly the chain threatens to break apart between his fingers. “You aren’t here to make me stop, are you? What can you do there, Stevie?” Billy hums sadistically, enjoying the sound of Steve’s pain. “You should just accept that you can’t protect anyone. You couldn’t protect the two people you claim to love, you can’t protect yourself.” He chuckles, as if he had just thought of the funniest thing. *“You can’t even protect those damn kids.”*

What?

Billy’s voice whispers in his ear, sick and taunting and everything Steve fears. “I’ll get them too, Stevie-Boy. You won’t be able to stop me. I’ll get them all, and they’ll float down here, with me.” When Billy laughs, borderline manic, it isn’t Billy anymore. “You’ll float too, Steve. You’ll float too. You’ll float too.” Underneath the terrifying chanting, Steve can hear another voice, soft as silk and brittle as paper, murmuring *‘It has been so long since we last tasted adult fear, what a treat!’*

Finally regaining some control over his body, Steve rips the phone away, meaning to fling the damn thing across the shipping container even if he has to rip it right out of the wall. He can still hear that sort-of-Billy, sort-of-something even worse voice shrieking ‘You’ll float too! You’ll float too!’ from the phone, and he stares and stares at it in the dark, feeling like he is moving in slow motion. All he has to do is hang up. Hang up, find the kids, get out of this fucking hellhole building, go home to find Jonathan and Nancy safe and sound, pretend this nightmare phone call never happened, and live happily ever after. It sounds so simple in theory.

The speaker of the phone starts to glow, the tiny holes lighting up orange. Steve really should hang it up. When his heart stops jackhammering like a frightened rabbit, Steve will hang up the phone and leave. Brighter and brighter the orange light glows. The phone casing starts to crack in his hands, the speaker falling off completely to reveal a light so big it takes up the entire world, yet so small it fits inside the phone.

*You'll float too, you'll float too, you'll float too, you'll float too.*

Steve can't look away. He feels like he falls into the orange light (*is he imagining the sharp rows of thousands of teeth surrounding it?*) falling down, falling up, falling sideways. His final thought is of Nancy and Jonathan – nothing in particular, just their names in his head – and he thinks that that is probably the most precious last thought he could ever have, and then he knows no more.

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*"Why are you staring at me like that?" Will asks, a little self-conscious under the full power of Eleven's soulful eyes. Yet again, he is struck with that urge to draw her, her curly caramel hair and careful features, soft, yet sharp at the same time. His fingers itch, inching towards his new sketchpad, freshly unwrapped and balanced on the top of the small pile of presents. The 'Happy 15<sup>th</sup> Birthday!' banner is still draped around Will's shoulders, courtesy of Max, and he fiddles with the plastic edge of it to distract his wondering hands. "El?"*

*Eleven tilts her head, blinking slowly, and Will can feel her mind ticking in the back of his own, but she's carefully shielding her words from him like they've been practising. The tip of her nose twitches, and she leans forwards suddenly, their knees touching and sharing the same breathing space. "Can I kiss you?" Eleven breathes, and the tops of her cheeks dust a faint rose colour. Will has a pencil in his favourite set the exact same shade.*

*"O-oh," Will stammers, casting his eyes down shyly. "Why?"*

*"I kiss Mike," she says softly, her hands touching his with light pressure. "And I feel warm. Love. You kiss Mike, and I know you feel warm. Love." She presses her forehead to his. "We love. So, will I feel warm if I kiss you?"*

*Eleven has a tentative grasp on sexuality and relationships. She knows that Will is what people call 'gay', knows that he likes other boys, but not boys and girls the way Mike, Steve, and Jonathan do. She also knows that Will likes her despite that, holds her hand and cuddles with her as they both do with Mike, but he doesn't kiss her. They've never even tried. She doesn't know how to explain herself properly, so she opens up and lets*

*Will feel her thoughts, hoping that he will understand.*

*“Sure,” Will murmurs after a beat, nodding. “It can’t hurt to try.”*

*They both pause, unsure how to go about it. It’s nothing like kissing Mike, Eleven realises before their lips have even touched. Her heart is doing weird flip-flops in her chest, but she doesn’t know if that’s her nerves, or Will’s. The kiss is soft, a chaste brush of their lips, and their eyes flutter closed at the same time with a gentle increase of pressure. At the same time, they pull back, breath fanning out over each other’s cheeks. They share eye contact for a stitch in time.*

*Will starts to giggle, the infectious sound making Eleven burst out in peels too. “Never again,” Will says cheerfully, and Eleven nods earnestly. “Too much like kissing a mirror.” Eleven has never done that, but she somehow still knows exactly what Will means. Will’s hand darts up to brush some of the curls off her face. “I still love you, though,” he whispers, grinning. “I guess it’s just a different kind of love.”*

*“Different, but not bad,” Eleven says, and she pulls him into her lap to hug him tightly.*

*Arms descend around them both and Mike is there, dropping his own kisses on their lips and cheeks with a huge, over-the-moon happy grin on his face. He had seen the entire exchange from the doorway, not wanting to intrude on their special moment. “I love you both,” he sniffles, and Will and El realise Mike has teared up, their heads jerking up in alarm. Mike is smiling brightly, and he yanks them back into the embrace. “So much.”*

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El keeps careful control of the rickety elevator as they descend into the belly of the building. Mike knows from the blueprints that their destination is even further underground than the basement was, and he tries not to think about it because he knows that he will start imagining the walls closing in around him, and the last thing El needs right now is a panicking boyfriend. They’re going beyond the original foundations of the building, the gateway having consumed them and several hundred feet of rock and dirt below, which means they have to get out of the elevator and into some sort of pulley system. Mike feels sick when they exit the elevator and cross the old control room,

and his eyes pass over shattered glass walls and computers covered in poorly-mopped up blood stains as El leads him towards the cart that will take them down the pit.

"Scared," El murmurs, her soft voice amplified by the quietness of the room. "What if the gate has opened again? If I closed it wrong, *he* might come back and hurt Will again." She pauses and grabs Mike by the waist when he walks past her, her hands pressing into his stomach as she buries her face between his shoulder blades, trying to force herself to breathe evenly. "What if *he* hurts you?"

It's enough to drag Mike out of whatever strange regressive funk he's been in for the past hour or so, ever since they first walked into Hawkins Laboratory. El needs him to be strong, so strong he shall be. He turns in the circle of her arms and wraps her shoulders in a warm embrace, dropping a kiss to the crown of her head and brushing her curls out of her eyes when she looks up at him. "Nothing can ever hurt me with you near," Mike tells her firmly. "You are more than capable of protecting me from anything, El, and you *have* protected me from countless dangers, be it a big scary monster, or some stupid mouth breather trying to break my face, or even my own damn clumsiness." That gets a giggle and a small smile out of El, and Mike has to kiss her. "If the gate is opening again, or there's some other weird shit happening, we'll do what we always do – *deal with it.*"

There's a crackle from Mike's hip, and El reaches down to pull his Supercomm off his belt. "*That was beautiful, Wheeler,*" Will says softly, and El can feel him in her head like he's standing right next to her. It's a much-needed comfort at the moment. "*El, I can feel how worried you are, and you know what I think about your abilities. Whatever is down there should just turn-tail and kick its own ass to save you the trouble.*"

Her nose screws up adorably and El's laugh is like a beautiful bell being struck in the dead, depressing former control room, and Mike fleetingly wishes that Will was there with them (*Mike will never begrudge Will taking care of himself, his boy has suffered enough for ten lifetimes over*) to hear it for himself, until Mike remembers that Will can not only hear it, but can also feel the happy sound in his very being. Mike might just be a little jealous over that, but not really. "Let's go, El," Mike says, and he feels like he shouldn't be grinning in

the face of what could turn out to be a Very Serious Problem – emphasis required, just in case – but he can't keep the expression off his face when El is that amused at something. “The sooner we check, the sooner we can grab Will and get out of here.”

“Okay,” El replies, pulling out of the hug only to take his hand and lead on, testing the cart’s electronic pulley system before deciding to work the controls herself. “Hold on,” she warns once they’re both standing inside, inclining her head towards the railing. “Might be bumpy.”

It’s definitely bumpy; Mike nearly gets thrown off his feet as El carefully picks her way around the rusty old mechanisms and begins lowering them down into the pit. She smirks at Mike absently as he jerks towards the railing and clings on for dear life until the ride smooths out as El gets the hang of the system. “I think I left my stomach up there,” Mike lilts, standing upright and brushing himself off as El snorts, and his face turns fond as a drop of blood flies out of her nose. He reaches out to wipe the streak away, and El turns her attention back to the pulley. “Is there even a floor?” Mike asks after what feels like hours of descending past cold, ragged stone pitted with bullet holes and dead, slimy vines. “Or do we just hang in the air?”

“About to find out,” El tells him, a small frown creasing her brows and a small trickle of blood steadily creeping towards her cupid’s bow. Mike’s thumb is already coming up to wipe that off too, but he doesn’t want to distract her, so he refrains, tucking his hands into his pockets. “Might be bumpy,” she says again, with slightly more emphasis. Mike has learned his lesson – he grabs onto the railing.

The bottom of the cart scrapes ear-splittingly as the metal hits rock, and possibly a little bit of bone. Mike has heard the story of El closing the gateway – the Mind Flayer bursting through to attack her as the Demodogs rained down on her, Hopper shooting them away until he ran out of bullets, and El ultimately driving the shadowed bastard back into the Upside Down, more power than ever coursing through her veins – and he knows the remains of the Demodogs and several of their victims were left to rot at the bottom of the pit, which would explain the smell. He chokes on the stench, sure he looks a picture with watering eyes and his pale face starting to flush with the

effort to not breathe in too deeply. A quick glance to the side shows that even El, whose nose was long ago desensitised to foul smells after a stint in a sewer cave she can barely remember, is struggling with it. There's something about her face, like a flash of recognition, and Mike takes her hand in his, their fingers slotting together with practiced ease.

"Are you ready?" Mike whispers, and El nods. Together, they step out of the cart, ignoring the faint crunches under the soles of their shoes.

Sound echoes strangely so far underground, and El is suffering a raging war of emotions and memories inside her, everything that happened to her the night the gate closed clashing with something she doesn't even think is a memory – it's like a ghost impression in her brain, a phantom pain in her feet and her lungs and her sinuses, accompanied by a primal fear so deep inside her she just wants to scream – and it has thrown her for a loop. She's sure that if it weren't for Mike's hand in hers, the warm familiar weight, and the torch he's shining ahead of them, she would get lost down here forever, claimed by the dead vines and the dead bones beneath her feet.

El knows that she has found the gate when every hair on her body stands on end, her curls lifting up off her shoulders and surrounding her like she's floating in water. Her skin tingles almost painfully, and she pulls Mike up short before he walks directly into the petrified webbing that once glowed a threatening, vibrant red. Mike actually whimpers as he shines his torch over the massive gateway, now nothing more than a twisted, ugly scar splitting the dirt and stone, and El knows he is thinking of her facing off against it, of Will being dragged out through it half dead and traumatised. Her trembling hand rests against the thick tentacle-like vines, gouged into the roughly ripped wall so haphazardly it looks to be the work of a giant, petulant child. El shrieks as her whole body seizes up, her eyes going so wide she thinks her eyelids might split to accommodate them. Something is calling out to her from beyond the gate, a voice so familiar she knows it in her blood, yet so foreign it makes her panic, her widened eyes suddenly seeing something not of this world –

– *The turtle lays on its back in the marshlands of the Nether, ancient shell sinking deeper into the bog as vines and tendrils reach out like hungry children to drag it down. Deaf, dumb, and blind, it waits; between one*

*blink and the next a year passes. They had been too late, too long returning to the accidental gate from delivering the girl through the Maternalum's lair. Ursupare rose from the shadows and escaped into the fresh, alive world Maturin once threw up, sinking into the mind of the young boy dragged through the Nether and back out, dead yet alive at the same time. Maturin had thought that all was lost, no longer possessing the powers to follow Ursupare through the Between and so leaving the world beyond to his mercy. They could see a bright future fading faster than it had been created.*

*Until something had happened. Something being the child Maturin had healed and tuned and returned to her world. While a lone human mother had burnt Ursupare from her son's body, the girl had come to the gateway, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of its destroyed world. She stood alone against Ursupare as he bore down upon her and sent him retreating back into the Nether furious and vowing vengeance against her.*

*Maturin is sure years have passed as they continue their slow descent into the earthen grips of the Nether, but time moves differently for them as it flows in blinks and breaths, and now the child has returned to the gateway, her power strong enough that it reaches Maturin through the Between. The other one is there too, the dead boy walking, close to the gate, but not close enough for Maturin to sense him properly. The children are strong, nearly strong enough to fulfil the destiny that Maturin has seen in wait for them, but there is still something missing. A third.*

*The girl is there, just on the other side of the gateway. Maturin hopes that she turns away and never looks back, as she had done when they dropped her at the other gateway all those years ago. Ursupare still lurks in the shadow of the great scar separating the Nether from the Between and the world beyond, and he will come for the girl if he senses her near –*

– Mike watches in mild horror as El's body goes taught and her feet arch up, higher and higher before her toes actually leave the filthy floor beneath them, her eyes wide and blank, staring up at the faint light filtering from the top of the pit, the thick pulley cables slashes of black in the gloom. If Mike didn't know better, he would think that El was floating through some other supernatural force, but even without Will's connection inside her mind, he can feel the raw energy of her power on his skin like a hot wind, his own hair starting to lift off his shoulders as El's fingers spread wider and wider on the

gateway and in the air. Her lips are moving, words in a language Mike has heard in his deepest, darkest dreams whispering out in strings of fragments of sentences, but he can't even begin to try understanding them.

He reaches out to touch her, to pull her back down to the ground for fear she'll float right away into the distance, and his Supercomm buzzes. “*Don’t touch her, Mike!*” Will gasps, and his voice – already warped by the aging speaker of the Supercomm – sounds thick and hoarse, and Mike realises that whatever El is experiencing right now, Will is also experiencing, if a little watered down. Mike has a horrible vision of Will all alone in that control room, intensely feeling everything that El does without anyone there to help him through it. “*If you touch her, you’ll break the connection!*”

“What connection?” Mike asks frantically, more worry piling on top of his head and making him feel like his feet are cracking the dirt underneath him and sinking into the ground. “Will, what?”

“*She’s made a connection with the Upside Down,*” Will pants out, and Mike can hear the effort that his boyfriend is putting into getting each word out clearly. “*She’s talking to something out there, trying to find out what is going on.*”

Mike balks, Will’s almost nonchalant ‘connection with the Upside Down’ sending painful memories of almost losing Will to the possession of the Mind Flayer, actually losing El to the destruction of the Demogorgon, and the terror Mike had felt in the Mind Flayer’s tunnels as the Demodogs chased them down, bubbling to the forefront of his mind. “Is that safe, Will? Who – no, *what* is she talking to? Is she in danger of – of *him* finding her again? Will, *can he find her again?*”

“*I don’t know, I don’t know!*” Will chokes. “*She’s using so much energy she’s blocking me out, I can’t hear her at all, and – shit! Fuck, I can’t get these goddamned cameras to work, and the others are looking for Steve and.*”

“What happened to Steve?” Mike asks, trying to think of what to do, how to help El and Will, and berating himself mentally for ever agreeing to this stupid idea of splitting up in the first place. “Is he

okay?"

Will actually whimpers, sounding quite pained. Mike's heart aches, not being able to help either of the people he loves in that moment. "*I don't know. About ten minutes ago, the rooftop cameras went out and I can't make them turn back on.*" He must know that Mike is going to suggest he go up and look for Steve himself – Will knows Mike so, so well – and he continues, "*Stay with her, Mike. Lucas and the others are already on the roof looking for Steve. Stay with El, she might need you to help pull her out.*" He dissolves into shaky whines, and Mike can't see him, but his hands are pressed tightly to his temples with his eyes screwed shut, the occasional tear rolling down his flushed cheeks to join the mess of blood dripping down over his lips and chin from his nose as he tries to reach out for El. "*Stay with her. I need to drop the PA to focus on these cameras, Mike. There's no signal all the way down there, so try not to get in trouble for the next ten minutes, please.*"

"What about you?" Mike whispers, actually pulling the Supercomm out of his belt to talk into it, the over-heating plastic sticking to his fingers acting almost as a placebo for Will's hand in his. "Are you okay?"

"*I'm fine,*" Will manages. "*Don't worry about me.*"

Mike closes his eyes, pressing his forehead to the speaker so he can feel the vibrations of Will speaking. "*I always worry about you.*" The line goes dead, and Will doesn't answer. Mike curses and drops the Supercomm at his feet, dragging his attention back to El.

The skin between her fingers has started to split, blood beading to the surface. Blankly staring still, her lips keep moving, faster as more words come out. Mike, panic roiling deep in his gut, puts his hands on his hips to stop them shaking as he tries to think of something to do; he can't touch El until she needs him, and he can't go up to Will and leave El helpless, but he needs to do *something* to help. Anything. He traces the movement of her mouth with his eyes. He wonders what she is saying – if it's actually her speaking, or someone (*something*) speaking through her – and realises that it could be very important to work out what she's saying. An idea strikes, and Mike whips his backpack off, plunging his hand inside and rummaging around under the maps and the box of bullets (*he doesn't want to think*

*(about the gun he has tucked into his back pocket, unloaded but still a weapon capable of destruction) until his hand closes around the metallic device.*

He pulls out Nancy's old tape recorder, the one that lead to the closing of the very building Mike and El are standing under, and hits 'record', holding the speaker as close to El's mouth without actually putting it *in* her mouth as possible, hoping the creaky microphone still works well enough to pick up her faint voice. As long as she can translate it when they are *all* safely out of the building, everything should be peachy.

Mike doesn't know how long they stay frozen like that, El floating and Mike holding the recorder awkwardly up to her face, but it feels both like hours and mere seconds at the same time, before something new happens. El's mouth snaps shut with a harsh clack of her teeth, and she exhales loudly through her nose, faint flecks of blood flying off the tip. Her eyes flutter open, and even from his angle below her and the gloom of the pit, Mike can see the dark red swirling in the whites of her eyes. "Mike..." she breathes, her freely floating hand suddenly fisted in the front of Mike's shirt. The tape recorder falls to the ground alongside the Supercomm. "Mike, I can hear them screaming."

The ground starts to rumble under Mike's feet unsteadily, radiating from the gateway outwards, and Mike gapes at El. "H-who?" he falters on the word, irrationally scared of what she is about to say (*no fear is irrational in Hawkins, Mike*) all of a sudden. "Who is screaming?"

El's head swivels on her arched neck unnaturally – Mike is frighteningly reminded of the owls in the nature video he and Will watched with El in the cabin a few nights ago, although El's doesn't turn completely to the back – so she's looking down at Mike, the streaks of blood on her face taking a turn as gravity shifts around them. "The children are screaming," she rasps, her red eyes unfocused and boring a hole into the bridge of Mike's nose. "So many children screaming from years ago and years to come." She starts to twitch, fingers spasming, legs kicking, her shoulders pulling back so tightly her shoulder blades nearly touch. Yelping, Mike grabs at her wrist, her hand still twisted in his shirt, and starts trying to tug her

back down to the ground. “They get taken, killed and eaten, through a gateway to a place between.”

Trying not to lose his footing on the shaking ground, Mike wraps his arms around her shoulders and pitches himself backwards. The move finally gets El’s feet to brush the dirt again, her hand ripping away from the gate, and he gags as vines as thin as wire snap and withdraw from around her palm, sinking back into the deep gouges of the closed gate with barely audible slithering sounds. Her powers had almost awoken the gate, he thinks to himself, spying long, thin cracks beginning to split the petrified surface of the gateway. Dust and dirt and dislodged bullets rain down on them from the sloping walls of the pit as the rumbling continues.

They hit the bucking ground with a dull thump, and El shrieks gutturally as she thrashes in Mike’s grip, blood from her hands and face splattering over them both, and Mike holds her loosely around the waist as she does, not wanting to hurt her, but not wanting her start floating again either. “El, it’s me!” he calls to her, reaching up with one hand to steady her head, raking his hand through her hair and down her face, cupping her neck and the side of her face firmly. “El, snap out of it, come back to me,” he pleads, her wild eyes rolling as she flails weakly, slipping out of his hold and bucking away from him. He wraps her up again, hands clasped on her spine under her shoulders firmly. “You’re not there anymore, you’re here with me, and nothing can get to you.”

“Mike,” El says, voice flat, and she falls limp against Mike, her head landing heavily on his breastbone as his knees press into her stomach where he’s sprawled on the ground. “I’m sorry.” He can feel his shirt getting wet under her cheek, and he moves his hands from her shoulders to the back of her head, stroking her hair with one while she reaches up with her own hands to clutch the other under her neck, seeking comfort. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” Mike tries to keep his voice level and soothing, willing his heart to stop racing before El feels it hammering against her face. The ground has finally stopped shaking. “You didn’t do anything.”

“I didn’t save them,” she cries quietly, her feet kicking out agitatedly

and her knees knocking on Mike's shins. "I was there, I could have saved them!"

Mike manoeuvres her with gentle movements until he can sit with her huddled in his lap, her head cradled against his neck between his pointy chin and bony shoulder, her hands digging into his arms hard enough to leave small, round bruises in their wake. "What are you talking about?" he murmurs into her hair, eyes closed as he rocks her in the darkness. "Where were you?"

"In the gateway. The old one. The *first one*," El says haltingly as , her lips brushing goose bumps over Mike's throat as her breath fans over his collarbones, exposed by the open neck of his shirt. "I saw them, the screaming children. They were dead. They were *floating*." Her tears wet the blood on her face and drip pink down onto Mike's hand braced comfortingly against her sternum. "There are more now, and I could have saved them, but I *ran away*."

"El, I don't understand what you're talking about," Mike tells her, trying not to let frustration leak into his voice. She doesn't deserve that, not after everything she's been through. "You need to help me understand," he pleads, dropping a light kiss on her forehead the way he sees Will do in the mornings sometimes, both of them soft-limbed, and sleepy-eyed. "What did you run away from?"

"*It*," El squeaks, her breath hitching as she curls in impossibly closer to Mike, quivering with all the emotions warring inside her as she picks at her blue cloth bracelet, undeserved shame radiating off her. "I ran away from *It*."

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Dustin streaks ahead of Lucas and Max on the roof, his heart beating in his ears as he sets his sights on the shipping container Will had set them towards, his only thought a never ending loop of '*Not Steve, not Steve, not Steve, please not Steve, anyone but Steve*' as his feet pound on the concrete rooftop. If something has happened to Steve on this mission that Dustin had plotted, planned, and executed without informing the older man or asking for his help, he will never forgive himself. His lungs burn when he finally reaches the container, and he pauses ever so briefly to survey the scene before him – the neatly

snipped padlock resting against the wall, the deep scrape marks indicating an extremely quick slam of the door. Heart beating so wildly that all he can hear is a high-pitched squeal in his ear, Dustin wraps both hands around the bar of the door and yanks it with all his might.

It doesn't budge.

By his third attempt, Max and Lucas have finally reached him, riding the longboard to a standstill beside him. Lucas immediately jumps off and tries to help Dustin with the door, Max joining them for a few minutes before diving for something in her backpack. Both boys' eyes widen in shock when she pulls a short, thick crowbar from the depths of her bag, wielding it confidently as she jams it into the crack of the doors.

"Don't just stand there staring, douchebags, *help me!*" she snaps, face riddled with fear and concern for Steve.

Between the three of them, and the crowbar, they slowly, slowly, *achingly* slowly prise the door open, feeling like they're fighting an entire army the entire time. Like there is something on the other side of the door trying to keep it closed. It *drags* on the concrete, making Lucas' teeth ache as the sound screeches through the still, summer air, and Max tries to cover her ears with her shoulders as she wipes the sweat off her brow. "That's enough," Dustin pants when the door is roughly halfway open. "The gap is big enough to get inside." He peers into the shipping container. "It's dark, there are no lights. Someone grab a torch." He holds his hand out and one is pressed into his palm. With Dustin in the lead, the three teenagers creep into the container, lips between teeth and breaths held between lungs and mouths.

"What the hell?" None of them knows, exactly, who says it, but they are all feeling it as Dustin shines the torch beam around the container, because there is Steve, at the other of it, his back facing them.

He is floating.

Max stifles a sharp scream, dropping the crow bar with a clatter as

she claps her hands over her mouth, afraid the sound will cause Steve to tumble out of the air. His feet are almost two feet off the ground, his back arched gracefully with his arms hanging loosely and his fingers pointing down to the floor. Not unkindly, Dustin shoves past Max and ducks inside properly, brushing aside strange white strings that the torch beam bounces off erratically as he runs to Steve, choking on Steve's name as he calls out to the only father figure he's ever known desperately. Steve's entire body is draped in those white things hanging from the ceiling. Dustin reaches the floating man and he grabs at Steve's arm to try and bring him down, succeeding only in turning him to face the door. It's Dustin's turn to repress a scream, nearly collapsing in shock when he sees Steve's face, Lucas' strong hands appearing suddenly on his shoulders the only thing keeping him upright as everything turns fuzzy for a few seconds, sight and sound blurring together nauseatingly.

Steve's face is slack, none of his usual wit and charm in his features. His hair floats around his head as limply as the rest of his body floats in the air, but it is his eyes that terrify Dustin. The once bright, vibrant hazel of Steve's eyes is clouded over, grey and lifeless, almost glowing silver when the light of a torch passes over them. Blankly, Steve is frozen staring at the ceiling, and Dustin can just make out dried tear tracks on his face. Something is beeping monotonically in the background, the sound amplified in the otherworldly silence of the shipping container, and Dustin has to force his eyes off Steve and to the wall behind him.

A red phone is bolted to the wall, smoke curling out of the dial wheel, the handset hanging by the cord and bumping against the wall slowly. Stumbling from Lucas' hold despite his friend's protests and every single one of Dustin's instincts yelling at him not to touch, Dustin lurches for the phone, holding it to his ear like it will solve all his problems. The beeping is coming from the speaker, and the longer he listens, the more he swears the beeping sounds like Morse Code. Just as he thinks he can make out the letters – I – H – E – A – R – T – D – E – R – R – Y – I – H – E – A – R – T – D – E – R – R – Y – the phone is batted out of his hand.

"-stin!" Max's hand waves in front of his face and Dustin jumps, nearly knocking into Steve as he does. "Dustin!" Max has an air about

her that suggests she might have been calling his name several times over, each more frantic than the last, with absolutely no response.

Gasping (*why is his chest heaving like that?*) Dustin grabs her hand to steady it. “*What?*”

“Look up,” Lucas says, voice deathly quiet.

Aiming the torch up, all three of them tilt their heads back, following the white strings up to where they are attached to hundreds of fat, round, red balloons. The whole container is filled with them, blanketing the metal roof so completely it may as well be made of rubber instead of steel, and they shine like ghostly rubies in the torch light, squeaking as they rub up against each other. “Where did they come from?” Max asks, one hand wrapped up tightly in Lucas’, and the other curled into Dustin’s sleeve. “*What are they?*”

“It doesn’t matter. We need to get out of here,” Dustin whispers, and it is as if his voice bounces back at them off the balloons, almost tauntingly. “We need to... wake Steve up, or fix whatever is wrong with him.” His voice trembles, and he pulls away from Max to grab at Steve. He comes down easily this time, whatever spell holding him up dissipating the more the three teenagers pull Steve’s body into their arms, deadweight as they start shuffling towards the exit.

Lucas bats at the balloon strings, which are... *growing*? They’re brushing the floor now, the waxed string sticking to their skin as the door seems to get further and further away. They reach it eventually, fighting the balloon strings the entire way until Dustin breaks out onto the roof again, tumbling backwards and bracing Steve’s shoulders. Just before she can make it out after Lucas, Max’s braid gets tangled in the strings, and she screams, her head getting yanked backwards as more curl around her throat and start to squeeze, Steve’s feet thumping to the ground as she throws her hands up to claw at her neck, gasping. Distantly, she hears Lucas calling her name before yelling at Dustin to keep going, Dustin dragging Steve out of the container completely, but her ears are ringing and all she can see is red, red, *red* balloons circling above her like sharks.

“Max!” Lucas yells, his Nam army knife slicing through the strings that are now circling her wrists, pulling her hands away from the

ones choking her. “Hold on, Maxie, hold on!” He grabs a fistful of strings above her head and severs them with one strong blow, his other arm circling around Max’s waist to keep her upright. Still met with resistance, Lucas sees Max’s braid still caught up in the strings. “I’m so sorry,” he tells her, wrapping his hand around the part of her braid not tangled and shearing the end off, strings and all. Her fiery hair whips out of the tight braid and he pulls her towards the door, towards that glowing rectangle of sunshine that promises freedom and safety, and Max stumbles weakly against him, lightheaded, dizzy, and her chest stuttering as she tries to gulp down proper lungfuls of air. Their screams ricochet when something behind them explodes, both turning their heads to stare as the balloons at the back of the container start to burst, rapidly getting closer to them as the strings drop to the floor like dead snakes, curling up and vanishing before their eyes. Lucas, tugging at Max’s waist, cries, “Run, Max!” but it is too late, the train of bursting balloons reaching them. It feels, to them, like a split second of tentative peace precedes the explosion of the balloon directly above their head, and Max swears she sees it filling up with dark, foreboding liquid as it swells, the rubber turning pink, and then white before it tears, but that could just be the shock from nearly dying.

The bang echoes around the shipping container like a firecracker going off and it happens in slow-motion as hot, thick, sticky blood splashes down on top of them, more than could ever be possible from a party balloon, burning their eyes and clogging their noses. Lucas’ feet slide on the wet, red mess of the floor, bringing him to his knees, and dragging Max along too. They are drowning in the blood, splashing in a frenzy, hands slipping on the metal floor of the container as it floods Max’s hair and drenches Lucas’ clothes as he throws himself over Max, until a clean pair of hands appear above them. Dustin grabs the back of Lucas’ jacket and the handle of Max’s backpack, giving an almighty tug and dragging them out into the sun, where they collapse in a bloody heap, Dustin sprawled on the roof with Lucas, winded, half lying on top of him, and Max draped over the both of them. Steve is lying a few feet away, his greyed-over eyes still blankly staring at nothing, his chest rising and falling shallowly, just enough to let them know he’s alive.

“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, *oh my god!*” Dustin wheezes,

scrambling to sit up and yanking Max and Lucas against him in a bone crushing hug, his hands slipping in the blood coating them. “I thought you were going to die, there was so much blood!”

Max squirms in his grip, trying to scoop the blood off her skin with shaking hands and clawing fingers. “*What the fuck was that?*” she wails, hands darting up to her hair and trying to wring the horrible redness out. “*What the fuck?*” She rolls awkwardly onto her knees and stares into the shipping container, shrieking when she sees the pool of blood spreading and dripping out on the rooftop, gloopy with the burst balloons and balls of strings swirled inside. “This isn’t happening, this can’t be real – *blood doesn’t explode out of balloon, this isn’t real, this-*”

“MAX!” Lucas crawls over to her and wraps her up in his arms. “Calm down, calm down, we have to get Steve out of here.” Drawing in a shuddery breath, Max sucks her lips in and let him pull her to her feet, only realising once they’re standing that she isn’t the only one shaking like a leaf.

Dustin is kneeling over Steve now, hands hovering over the man’s face and chest, as if unsure where to land first. “Steve?” he whispers, finally settling for shaking Steve’s shoulder with careful pushes. “Steve, wake up. Come on, buddy, wake up.” Steve remains motionless, breathing rhythmically and gazing at nothing. “Steve, please...”

“Come on, man,” Lucas says, his voice hitching as he leads Max over, putting his hand on Dustin’s shoulder comfortingly, wincing at the wet, red handprint he leaves on Dustin’s shirt. “Let’s get him out of here before whatever did this to him comes back.”

Together, they manage to prop Steve up on Dustin’s back, on Max’s longboard, wheeling slowly across the roof towards the elevator. Lucas is helping push, and Max has the Supercomm in her hands, mindful not to drip blood on it, as she tries to get in contact with anyone. “Will, are you there?” she asks for the fifth time as they climb into the elevator, shoes squelching disgustingly on the floor. “Will, come on, we need help!” She has already tried Mike and El, but they are a long way out of range. “Will?” The elevator doesn’t move, the doors don’t even close, and Max realises that Will has

disappeared completely, and they're stranded on the roof. "I think things just got even worse," she murmurs to the others, her hand curling in to hold the Supercomm to her chest. "How are we supposed to get off the roof?"

-

Will's eyes snap open, and he screams. The room is pitch black around him, every single electronic device inside the security room shattered and smoking and spewing fried wires; all the televisions and the lights, and possibly all the security cameras on the fourth floor too. His head is pounding – half his pain, half El's pain – and he whimpers, long and low into the tiled floor, trying to work himself up to moving out of the foetal position. When El snapped out of her connection with the Upside Down, she came rushing back into Will's head so quickly it had momentarily stunned both of them, and Will had zinged so hard he blacked out. As he comes to slowly, so slowly it's like clawing his way out of a jar of molasses, he can hear Mike comforting El, Mike's soft '*You're not there anymore, you're here with me, and nothing can get to you...*' reaching Will distantly as he and El struggle to regain their control. Will can feel El come back into herself, numbly telling Mike about what she had seen, and it gives him the strength he needs to sit up, bracing his hands on the cold floor and pushing up, groaning as his head swims. Will is actually pretty glad that there isn't any light in the room, because that would probably just make the nausea worse.

He can hear a high-pitched squealing noise just above his head, and Will presses his hands to his ears to try and block it out. It's an ineffectual move, the sound still piercing in his head, and he pulls his hands away wet from what he assumes is blood, squinting at the dark splash of it on his skin in the dark room. Hauling himself up on the edge of the desk, Will winces when shard of glass from the televisions prick his fingers. The squeal is coming from his Supercomm, and Will scoops it up, cradling it against his chest before hobbling towards the door, hand slippery on the knob. Finally getting the door open, Will emerges into the equally dark corridor, all the lights either off or blown up there too. Glass crunches under Will's feet as he slowly picks his way to the elevator. He needs to get it working again if any of his friends are going to make it out.

Dizzily, Will slaps his empty palm onto the elevator button, eyes screwing shut as he rests his forehead against the wall. *Zing.* It's the only part of his abilities that terrifies him (*he calls it 'tunnel vision' privately, buried so deep in his thoughts even El doesn't know*) where he can feel the electricity like a map in his head the way he had seen the tunnels of the Upside Down through the Mind Flayer's eyes. He follows the cabling up the elevator shaft to where he can sense four people waiting in the cart – the others have found Steve! – and he starts to lower them down, hoping he didn't startle them too much. Someone is fiddling with the signal on the Supercomm, and Will taps into it directly, his own still squealing shrilly in his hand. He has never tried to connect directly into a signal before, usually just amplifying and manipulating the signals to connect, say, a PA system and some hand-held radios; but he knows that is has to be possible. Mike had told him about El channelling him while he was trapped in the Upside Down, how they had heard Will shakily singing The Clash and known he was alive when everyone else thought he was dead, determined once again to find him.

“Dustin?” he croaks, shocking himself at how torn up his voice sounds. He must have been screaming far longer before he regained proper consciousness. “Dustin, come in?”

*“Will? Please tell me it’s you moving the elevator and we’re not about to free fall six stories, because that would be the perfectly gruesome ending to this perfectly terrifying day.”*

Will has no idea who is speaking. He can't necessarily *hear* the words, but they're echoing in his ears like he is reading them off a typewriter. “It is me, don’t worry. Sorry for vanishing, I had a little... uh, it doesn’t matter.” He doesn’t want to tell them that his powers had surged so much that it had knocked him clean out. "...Bit of a power surge. I’ll take you down to the foyer and meet you there. Hang tight.”

*“You’d better hurry,”* the voice says, still in that hearing-written-words sort of way, *“Steve isn’t in good shape, and neither are we.”*

His heart jolts painfully (*it’s your fault, you couldn’t keep the camera working*) at those words, and Will starts moving the elevator faster, knowing that the sooner he gets them safely to the foyer, the sooner

he can make his way to the stairs. Will doesn't even have to look to know that his little episode had fried the elevator doors, knows that he'd need a crowbar or the like to prise them open enough to slide into the elevator if he did stop it on the fourth floor. "It'll only be another minute," Will assures his friends, concentrating on making sure they have a smooth journey down.

"*Will, come in, Will. Have you turned the PA back on? It's Mike.*" Shit. Will's Supercomm is still out of commission, and now Mike is trying to get in contact with him. "*Will, we really need help with the elevator – El wiped herself out getting the pulley back into the basement, and now we're stuck halfway up the elevator shaft. She's using all her energy to stop us crashing back down.*" Fuck. He doesn't know if he can tap two frequencies at once – if Will can't differentiate the voices of whoever is speaking, he can't run Mike and Dustin through the same channel – and he doesn't know if he can handle moving two elevators at once, because he can already feel more blood slicking up his face and neck from the effort of keeping up with one of each. If only he could get the whole building powered up, he could get the PA, the elevators, and the lights all going at the same time...

Wait.

"Everyone just hold on," Will says, trying to keep the cracks and shakes out of his voice, not wanting to add any more stress to the current situation. "I'm going to try and get power to the whole building." He can hear El weakly protesting in the back of his mind, but he ignores her, determined to actually be useful after ruining part of Dustin's plan.

Will's Supercomm hits the floor with a squeak and the clatter of plastic on tile, and he braces both his hands against the wall, his forehead hitting the dirty plaster with a thunk as he pictures the generators in the basement, willing that feeling that comes to El so easily to come to him too. His fingers start to break holes in the walls, the paint going crisp and black before flaking to the floor as the damp plaster underneath splits and bows until Will's fingers are touching the very wires of the building. He remembers the long, hard weeks he spent with El after the Mind Flayer, nearly five years ago now, each of them thirteen and struggling to learn about these abilities thrust upon them without the aid of a manic scientist or

well-meaning doctor to guide them in their learning. She had tried, in her own stilted way, to explain how she could suddenly do *more*, feel *more*, and access *more* than even their friends' stories had told –

– Will flops down on the leafy ground outside the Hopper family's cabin, panting like a dog and wiping sweat out of his eyes. "I'm just not getting it," he whines to Eleven, the girl sitting perched on the steps a few feet away and holding the radio they are practicing on in her lap. Bloody tissues are strewn around them like red-tinged snow, an empty box by Will's elbow and a brand new one at Eleven's feet, a slab of water bottles staying cool in the shade. It feels like they have been at it for hours, but Will can tell that it's probably only been about forty-five minutes. "How come this is so easy for you?" It slips out before he can think about it, and he shoots up, ready to apologise, because how could he be so insensitive?

Eleven doesn't seem particularly concerned, just shrugs her shoulders and ruffles her hair – so long now that it brushes her shoulders, the weight of it pulling her curls out into soft ringlets that Mike likes to twine around his fingers when the two of them are reading together – before saying, "Wasn't always easy. Papa said fear and anger helps. He lied." Her face grows dark at the mention of the man she knows as 'Papa', before smoothing out into a funny sort of smile that Will can feel in his head. "The turtle made me strong."

"The turtle?" Will asks, eyebrows shooting up. This is the first he has ever heard of... a turtle? He knows that Mrs Wheeler has a glass turtle on her mantelpiece, and Will's favourite toy as a child had been a carved wooden turtle, but what on earth is Eleven talking about. "What turtle?"

Eleven blinks at him rapidly, and Will can hear her confusion. "What is... turtle?" she asks, eyes wide. She honestly doesn't even realise she had said anything.

"You just said... never mind," Will waves her off, lying back down with a small groan as his head thumps onto the wooden veranda. He's too exhausted for riddles and explaining marine life. He'll add 'turtles' to Mike's list of 'Cool Stuff To Show El' and ask his mom if they can rent a sea life documentary for their next sleepover. "If fear and anger don't work, what do you focus your powers on?" He wants to ask her how she closed the gate, but those wounds are barely six months old, still too new, too raw to bring up with himself, let alone with the girl who faced the

*monster down and won. “And is it something that will help me?”*

*Standing, pausing momentarily to set the radio carefully by Will’s feet, Eleven walks over and sits down beside him, her hand by his ear as she pets the long strands of his hair absently. “Protecting,” she says simply, staring away into the woods around them. “Not fear, protecting. I want to protect my friends, and my family. So I have to be strong, or they could get hurt.”*

*“What about you?” Will asks curiously, turning his head to look up at her. “Don’t you want to protect yourself too?”*

*She shrugs in response, a move Will is convinced she has picked up from Hopper in the last six or so months (he thinks it’s adorable, her shoulders are always at different heights and she never knows what to do with her face) and murmurs, “I don’t matter. As long as everyone else is safe.”*

*Will flies upright, his mouth agape as he grabs onto her hand earnestly. He doesn’t know how to articulate the intense emotions that flooded over him at the almost callous way she threw her lot in like that, in a simplistic enough way that it will make sense to her. He throws his hand out to the radio. Zing. He feels it deep in his chest, expanding his ribs and igniting his blood. With a sharp squeal that quickly settles into static as Will turns his hand like he’s turning an imaginary tuning knob, the radio comes to life and starts to play. To the soft refrains of ‘Time After Time’, Will turns to Eleven and wipes the blood from his nose on the back of his wrist. “If you won’t protect yourself,” he tells her determinedly, “I will. Because Mike won’t be the only one who shatters if you get taken away from us again.”*

*Mouth in a small ‘o’, Eleven nods silently, her eyes swimming as she takes his hand. “You did it,” she says after a beat, face breaking into a small smile. “I knew you could.” –*

– “If you won’t protect yourself,” Will whispers stoically to the wall, “I will.”

*Zing.*

Will gasps, staggering away from the wall and folding down onto his

knees like a puppet with its strings cut, while his mind explodes open. He is the generator, he can feel every metal inch, every rubber button, every wire and cord and dial. With a great push – both against the wall and in his head – Will reconnects all the severed lines, restores the broken panels, fixes the fried wiring, and kickstarts the entire system. It's beyond turning the lights on. His whole body sings as electricity courses through him, his heart beating in time with the pulses firing through the generators as the entire building comes to life.

Nothing Will has ever felt before compares to this (*is this how the Mind Flayer felt taking over Will's body? no. don't think like that*) and he doesn't think anything could ever live up to it. He feels every light that turns on, every computer that whirs back to life, every single piece of machinery that suddenly becomes operational again. The elevators jolt and jar for a second before they start to run on their own, Dustin and the others heading down to the foyer as Mike and El are brought up from down below, Will can feel the two sets of cables like tendons, and he knows that the slightest twitch of the wrong joint and he could snap them like string.

The elevators reach their destination and the doors sliding open are like short breaths in choking lungs, and Will digs his fingers into the carpet, pulling himself to his feet and loping in the direction of the stairwell. It's time he re-joined the rest of the party – judging by the amount of blood dripping from his nose, rolling down his cheeks from his eyes, he doesn't have a lot of energy left – and they got the hell out of this awful, cursed building.

Halfway down the last flight of stairs before he reaches the foyer, Will can still feel the electricity spreading through the building, hitting the roof and reigniting the satellites, connecting the phonelines for non-existent phones, and then it all freezes, to the tune of a ringing phone. Will's throat closes over and he loses his footing, tumbling awkwardly down the last few steps to sprawl by the door into the foyer. There shouldn't be a phone ringing.

Will lets it ring – it's not like he has any way of answering it – and silence falls. Until a voice starts whispering, dancing along the electrical currents and murmuring in Will's ear.

*“Hey there, Willy-boy!”* the voice taunts, gravelly and giggly, and chilling to the bone. *“Been playing in any shadows recently?”* There’s a sound like the unholy offspring of a cough, a growl, and a laugh, wrapping around Will’s heart and starting to squeeze. *“Dug any tunnels? Killed any innocent people? What happened to Steve is all your fault, you know. Just like everything else. He’s floating, and soon, you’ll float too. You’ll float too, Willy, you’ll float too.”*

“NO!” Will screams, even though he doesn’t know why. He wrenches himself out of the electricity with a guttural screech and the feeling of it flowing out of his body is enough to bring real tears to his eyes, flushing the blood out as he flips onto his stomach and starts to crawl away from... from what? An imaginary phone on the roof? “GET AWAY!” The voice disappears with the power, and Will finally finds his feet on the floor, scrambling for the door and reaching for the handle. The door rips open before his fingers can close around it, and Will pitches forwards, his momentum sending him careening into a very shocked Mike, who buckles under the sudden onslaught of six entire feet of Will Byers. Will grips Mike’s shoulders tightly as they sink down onto the floor, before relenting and wrapping his arms around Mike properly, sobbing into his boyfriend’s neck. “Mike!” he whimpers. “Mike, I heard it. It talked to me through the electricity.”

Hanging onto Will’s waist and trying to keep on keeping calm – which is very hard to do when your girlfriend is barely recovering from being knocked unconscious after catapulting her mind into an evil alternate dimension, and now your anxiety-ridden boyfriend comes tumbling and screaming out of a stairwell terrified out of his mind – Mike kisses Will’s temple. “What did, Will?”

*“It,”* Will and El say in tandem, and Will lifts his head up to lock eyes with the girl where she’s propped up against the wall, face bleary and rumpled in that ‘just waking up’ sort of way, but nothing like how she looks in the morning sun after a long night’s rest, looking as drained and bloody as Will feels. Mike swears, confusion raging inside him as he reaches up to run a hand through Will’s hair comfortingly. What is this thing they have both now referred to?

That’s when Will sees the others, and they are *drenched* in blood. Will chokes on his next breath at the sight of them (*there’s so much blood*) Max’s hair limp and plastered to her neck and shoulders, her

longboard covered in wet footprints, Lucas' sopping clothing dripping a gruesome puddle onto the floor, and Dustin splashed and splattered from head to toe with red that doesn't seem like it is going to be drying any time soon. All the lights are all dead, some are even shattered, and the foyer is full of that deep, rich orange light of an early summer sunset (*when did it get late enough for the sun to be setting? how long have they been inside the lab?*) and it glints off the blood coating the three, lighting the curves of their bodies and sticky folds of their clothes with orange and gold. They look like avenging angels to Will's frazzled mind, armed with a crowbar and a skateboard as they stand in a protective triangle around...

"Oh, Steve," Will says, his voice cracking, starting to tremble in Mike's arms as the boy helps him up off the ground. "What the hell happened?"

The entire party clumps together around Steve's motionless body, El hanging limply off Mike's shoulder and clinging to one of Max's arms for extra support as Max, in turn, holds onto Lucas' hand with a grip so tight her knuckles turn white. Will leans on Mike, on his other side, an arm around Mike's waist both for stability, and so Will can touch El's hip to remind him that she's still there as Lucas reaches out briefly to pat Will's shoulder. Hands shaking, Dustin crouches down by Steve's head and carefully readjusts the hair that has fallen out of place.

"We found him like this," he murmurs, eyes downcast. "In one of the shipping containers. He was just... floating in the air." He takes a deep, hollow breath, trying to stave off crying. "There was a phone on the wall that was all black and smoking."

Will's ears rush. "Floating?" he croaks, accidentally tightening his hold on El's hip enough that she gasps. "Did you say floating?" Even though the power is once again gone, with Will no longer maintaining and supplying the electricity to the generators, he can still hear that ghastly voice slithering into his head, sitting just under his skin. *What happened to Steve is all your fault, you know. Just like everything else. He's floating, and soon, you'll float too. You'll float too, Willy, you'll float too.* "And there was a phone?"

Dustin nods, Max and Lucas echoing the action with wide eyes.

*...all your fault, you know...*

“We get out of here,” El says hoarsely, and Will can tell that she has been screaming recently. “Now.” She has to pause for breath, still winded and drained from her early escapades. “Mike has a recording, and Max says they found something earlier. We go, look after Steve.”

They don’t need to be told twice.

Mike helps El and Will limp out of the building, settling El in the sidecar of his motorbike after deeming her the least able to ride double at that particular moment, pulling her helmet over her hair and buckling it under her chin with a soft kiss to her cheek. Pulling his own helmet on and passing Will’s over, Mike swings up onto the bike’s seat, and Max ventures over to help Will get on behind Mike, steadyng Will’s shoulders as he sits gingerly and wraps his arms around Mike, tucking his lanky form against Mike’s back. Max doesn’t leave to help the other two with Steve until she is satisfied that Will isn’t going to fall off the back of the bike. “Where are we heading?” she asks Mike, scraping her sticky hair off her skin, twisting it into a dripping rope, and throwing it over her shoulder. She makes to wipe her hands off on her jeans, and realises there’s just as much blood on the denim as there is in her hair. “Hospital? Your house? The station?”

“Hospital,” Mike decides. “We don’t... we don’t know what’s wrong with Steve, and at least at the hospital they’ll be able to look after him until we have more information.” His chest suddenly constricts at the thought of having to tell Nancy about Steve, his breath hitching. Will strokes Mike’s stomach carefully, probably thinking about Jonathan. Their older siblings are going to be absolutely devastated. “Fuck,” Mike whispers. “We screwed up.”

Max flicks his shoulder and gives him an empathetic look, her eyes soft. “Don’t think like that, Paladick. What’s done is done. Now we have to fix it.”

“Thanks, Zoom-ass,” Mike murmurs, cutting off further conversation by igniting the bike. “See you at the hospital.”

As the bike speeds away with an almighty roar, Max trails back to her

crappy, wood-panelled convertible, acquired third hand from a dodgy car yard, and silently helping Lucas fold the roof down so they can lower Steve onto the back seat without risking bumping him on the doors. She fiddles with the fasteners, and her eyes stray over to the other half of the parking lot, where Steve's cruiser is parked diagonally across several almost-faded parking lines. Biting her lip, she slings her backpack off, untying her board from the front of it and sliding it into the footwell before shoving her hand inside, glad that the fabric is waterproof, and therefore bloodproof, nothing inside damaged. Her fingers brush over the stuffed turtle briefly before she unearths her keys. "Catch, Luke," she says, tossing the keys to Lucas, who fumbles with them before securing his grip. "Take Steve to the hospital, Mike and the others will meet you there."

"Where are you going?" Lucas and Dustin ask together, awed that she would trust her car with either of them. The LeBaron Woody might be a piece of shit, but it is Max's piece of shit, and she loves that car almost as much as she loves her skateboard.

Max squares her shoulders, leaning into the car and fishing in Steve's pocket for the cruiser's keys, and holding them up in front of her with a determined frown. "I'm doing what we should have done a week ago," she deadpans, curling her fist around the keys so tightly she risks cutting her fingers on them. "I'm going to call for backup."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

And there's the first chapter! Hope you all enjoyed it - there's one more chapter set in Hawkins, and then we're jumping ship to Derry for the rest of the story. Hopefully any questions raised will be answered in the next instalment, there's A LOT of plot exposition coming your way. Chapter Two: Mumbo Jumbo won't be posted until at least the second week of January due to work commitments and a large continuity error that I have only just noticed, leaving me having to rewrite the last half of the chapter. Don't forget to leave a comment and kudos, and come talk to me [here](#).

## 4. Chapter Two: Mumbo Jumbo

### Summary for the Chapter:

*Derry, Maine.*

The Supercomm hits the kitchen tiles and shatters as the ancient, brittle plastic flies off in every direction, mixing in with shards of china from Karen's teacup as it too falls to the floor from Karen's limp hand. Mother and son Wheeler stare at each other with near-bulging eyes.

*Derry, Maine.* Mike sees a house, a bed of neatly-trimmed dead and dying sunflowers, and a swing set. *Derry, Maine.* He walks up the garden path from the freshly painted gate, familiar and alien at the same time. *Derry, Maine.* The front door opens smoothly before his fingers have even brushed the wooden surface, and Mike finds himself in a living room he thought he had seen in the drawings of a picture book he forgot long ago—

### Notes for the Chapter:

GOD HERE IT IS AT LAST! This chapter just brushes 20k, and would you believe that it's only a filler chapter? Hopefully this answers a few question, and makes you ask a few more. Also - WE'RE FINALLY ON OUR WAY TO DERRY! This is the last chapter set in Hawkins until the epilogue, and there are a few little bits here set in Derry. Just a word of warning, this chapter is a shambles, and I didn't finish editing it because I'm sick of the sight of it. ENJOY!

EDIT 22/1: I went back through and edited this chapter, and I've added some extra bits. Sorry for

clogging the tag!

## Chapter Two: Mumbo Jumbo

### Five Days Earlier

*A sharp kick to the back of his knee wakes Mike at some ungodly hour of the morning, and he grumbles plaintively as he rolls over, grumbling some more – this time in confusion – when he gets a mouthful of long, rose-scented hair. Last time he checked, neither of his partners had long hair. Startling upright in a brief moment of panic, Mike finds himself sprawled out on the floor with Max, new campaign plans still spread out around them. That's right – Max, having found her footing nicely as the party's self-appointed 'Zoomer' over the past few years, became fascinated with Mike's planning process for their campaigns, and had shown up at his house to help with the new one – they had been arguing over the viability of a space-themed campaign featuring their rather Medieval characters, and they must have fallen asleep. Midnight had just arrived when she had appeared in the Wheelers' basement, looking oddly empty with just Mike sitting there alone on one of the very rare nights when Will and El aren't staying over, demanded back home for 'family time' by their respective parents.*

*"Why are you kicking me?" he whines at her, batting her shoulder indignantly. "Do you kick Lucas like that?" He rolls his aching shoulders – the floor is never a good place to sleep on. "God, what time is it?"*

*"Early," Max croaks, rolling further away from Mike and wincing when pens and stray figurines stab into her back. "My mom's gonna be so worried," she adds, not sounding at all concerned about it. It might have been several years since she and her mother had packed their things up and left the Hargrove men for good, but she still has a somewhat-rocky relationship with Susan, having never quite forgiven her mother for putting her through Neil and, particularly, Billy's abuse in the first place. "Crap. Did we ever reach a decision?"*

*Mike rubs at his eyes and crawls over to the couch, yanking the blanket off and throwing it around his shoulders. "I don't think so," he tells her around a yawn, offering her a corner of the blanket to tuck her bare feet into. Summer has arrived, but there's the barest hint of chill in the air still, and Max's toes are red, even in the half-light of morning. "We were still*

*talking about if we needed to update-”*

“MIKE!”

*Both Max and Mike jump as Mike’s Supercomm, wedged between two of the couch cushions, suddenly blares at them.*

“MIKE WHERE ARE YOU?!?”

*Scrambling for the radio with wide eyes and nearly sending himself crashing to the rug when the blanket tangles around his knees, Mike scoops it into his hands. “El!?” he asks loudly, voice wrought with fright. She sounded pained, and terrified. “El, what’s wrong!?”*

“Scared,” she whispers suddenly, voice barely audible over the Supercomm. “The dream came back. Not used to waking up alone.” She whimpers, and Mike’s chest aches when he realises that she is crying, picturing her curled up in the darkness of the cabin with her sheets pulled up over her head. “Started the same, with the boat and the crossroads, but the end was different. There was a girl with one shoe and her face was all bloody and gone.”

*Max gags at that description, and Mike startles, briefly having forgotten she was there in the basement with him. “What the hell?” she hisses, knee-walking over and slapping her hand down onto Mike’s shoulder empirically, staring at him with eyes wide in the dark. “What is she talking about? What dreams?”*

*Before Mike can answer, the Supercomm makes a fizzing noise, someone else trying to tune in to the frequency. “Mike?” Will asks, and he sounds just as afraid as El, but his breathing is harsh and laboured, like he is running. “Mike, are you there?” His voice is shaking. “Mike, the dreams-”*

“They’re back, I know,” Mike murmurs gently. “I know, El is on the other channel.” Will lets out a watery chuckle, and mutters something about how he ‘should have known’. “Yeah,” Mike says, trying to smile despite his brows creasing. “I take it you had the same dream? Girl with one shoe and a missing face?” He catches sight of Max’s face out of the corner of his eye, eyebrows climbing so far up her face they’re threatening to disappear into her fiery hairline, and her mouth hanging open slightly, be

*it in confusion or shock, Mike doesn't know. He can hear Will panting in his ear. "Will, where are you?"*

*"In the woods, I think I was heading for the cabin." He pauses to catch his breath. "But I was half asleep, and now I'm kind of... lost."*

*"By yourself?" Mike asks, leaping to his feet. "Jesus, Will. Stay right where you are, we're coming for you!" Before Will can get a, 'we?' out, Mike grabs Max's arm and starts dragging her towards the back door, the Supercomm clutched in his other hand. "We're coming for you!"*

*Max tries to tug her arm out of Mike's hand, but he can be a strong, stubborn bastard when he's worried, and right now he is very, very worried. "Paladick, where are we going?" Max asks, digging her heels in as Mike pulls her around to the garage and towards his motorbike. "No, no, no! No motorbikes!"*

*Whirling around, Mike wraps her wrists up in his long-fingered hands, staring into her eyes earnestly as he speaks in a hushed, serious voice. "Max," he starts, brown eyes endless in the dawn light. "I know you hate the bike, I understand, I really do. You like walls, and being able to control how fast you're going when you're breaking the legally set speed limits. But Will is out there, alone in the woods, and he's scared. You guys have probably noticed that he and El have been really out of it for a while now, yeah? Well, they've been having these dreams. Weird dreams. Not every night, but enough that it's fucking up their sleeping habits."*

*"Yeah, just a little bit," Max mutters, remembering that during the past few 'girls' nights' she and El have had – where they make a blanket fort in Max's bedroom and lie on their backs with torches making shadow puppets on the roof while telling each other stories and taking a well deserved break from their overly-ridiculous friends and boyfriends – El has been withdrawn and tired. "What's causing the dreams?"*

*An uncomfortable look crosses Mike's face, and he shrugs, finally turning that intense look off Max as he fishes the helmets out of the sidecar – there are three of them, gifted to him from Steve the day after Mike arrived home with the Yamaha, afraid Mike was going to crash and bash his brains out. "We don't know," Mike says eventually, handing Max the black helmet El usually wears, decorated with strawberry stickers and an Eggos wrapper, and keeping the yellow one for himself. "But it's something*

*strange. They have the same dream almost every night, and they've never told me about it any great detail, but I know that it scares them.*" He adjusts his chin strap and mounts the bike, bedraggled curls poking out from underneath. "Do you wanna ride doubles or in the car?" he interrupts himself, before continuing. "They say there's a paper boat floating in a drain, and a monster that catches it at the bottom. Sometimes, there's music, and sometimes there's blood, but there is always a street sign, for Jackson Street and... Jackson Street and..." It's like his tongue refuses to form the words, his face screwing up, and Max scurries over to make sure he's okay. "And Witcham," Mike finally gets out. "Sorry."

*Max shoots him a concerned look. "It's... okay," she says, climbing into the sidecar. Riding double is sort of a thing she does with Lucas, the two of them sometimes riding out along Hawkins Fall in the evenings, her chin on his shoulder as he tells her stories about their surroundings. "Let's just go get Will." She clears her throat, and side-eyes Mike. "And then, tomorrow, the three of you can tell Dustin and Lucas about this."*

"What, why?" Mike whines, almost defensive. "They're just dreams." It comes out robotically, like that's a phrase he has said – or heard – many a time lately.

*"Because these 'just dreams' are clearly affecting Will and El in a bad way, and it's our duty as a party to look after them." Mike starts the bike to avoid answering her, and Max stifles a small scream as she grabs onto the side of the car. "Where's the seatbelt in this fucking thing?!" she yells over the sound of the engine roaring to life, flailing a hand to whack Mike in the shoulder. "MIKE!"*

*The door into the garage from the house is flung open behind them as the bike rumbles out and into the night, and Max sees Karen Wheeler tripping sleepily across the garage in her night gown, her face slack with shock and apparently halfway through calling out to them. Max doesn't know why she bothers – she should be used to Mike dashing off into the night after his wayward friends by now – and Max offers the woman a half-hearted, apologetic shrug before Mike pulls the bike up onto the road and they're flying off on their way to the woods.*

*"I hate it when you use my own party rules against me!" Mike complains loudly a few minutes later as the big, fancy houses give way to trees and*

*telephone poles. Max knows that they'll hit farmland a little further down the road, and then they will be fully into the woods. She hopes Mike knows where he's going, or they might end up as lost as Will. "Damn you, Zoom-ass, making me feel all guilty." He turns his head to give her a wobbly smile so she knows he's only joking.*

*Fingers still clutching the sidecar in a death grip, Max shakily returns it. "Gotta keep you on your toes," she calls, her voice nearly snatched away by the wind, they're going so fast. "Can't you go just a little slower?"*

*It takes them just over an hour to find Will, sitting patiently – if not a little nervously – on a tree stump in the woods with his Supercomm turning over in his hands as he makes it play music, blood beading on his top lip with the effort. It turns out he was only a few minutes' walk away from the cabin (Will feels incredibly sheepish and guilty about dragging Max and Mike out after him because he got lost half a mile away from his destination) and, with Will riding double and Max still clinging to the sidecar for dear life, Mike drops him off there, sparing kisses for Will and a very sleepy, distressed El. He promises to come back in the morning and drives Max home, loitering awkwardly on her doorstep.*

*"What, Mike?" she groans, tired, windswept, and trying to hide how worried she is about her friends.*

*Mike shuffles his feet. "Hawkins Falls, after lunch tomorrow. I'll talk to them, we'll tell you guys everything, okay?"*

*Waving him off with a small nod, Max opens the front door and tip-toes inside so she doesn't wake Susan – if the noise of the bike's engine didn't accomplish that already – and she waves to Mike before closing it. Max shrugs her hoodie and jeans off and climbs into bed, her bedside clock telling her that it is almost five in the morning. A few hours of sleep won't do her any harm. She falls asleep with a brick of dread making itself comfortable in her stomach and a frown marring her face – what is going on with her friends?*

*With the afternoon sun glinting off the water so many feet below them, a round of sandwiches from Hopper in their bags, the bike parked in the tree-line, and El's favourite sundress fanning out in the soft breeze, Mike, Will, and El make their way to the party's usual summer picnic spot on the edge of Hawkins Falls where the rest of the party is waiting for them.*

*Max's hair is lit up like fire as she leans against Lucas' shoulder, all denim shorts and a Dig Dug shirt Will painted for her for her birthday, and Lucas' arm is loose on her shoulders as he and Dustin bicker amiably about if Dustin's new hat clashes with his shoes, all three of them grinning brightly. A click sounds from beside Mike, and he and Will look over to see El with her Polaroid held up, the fresh photo developing in her hand. She has a shelf full of photo albums in the cabin, each album filled to bursting with pictures of her friends and family as a reminder of all that she has gained over the years.*

*Mike wishes this moment could last forever.*

*"Hey, guys!" Will calls out, tugging on Mike's hand to get him to start walking again. "Mike, come on." El grabs Mike's other hand and helps Will drag Mike across the gravel. "We brought sandwiches!"*

*"I knew there was a reason you were my favourite, Byers," Dustin crows happily, slinging an arm up over Will's shoulders and starting to pat him down for said sandwiches. "Are they PB and J or roast beef?"*

*El pokes him and shoos him off Will, handing him the bag. "Egg," she informs him. "I ate the peanut butter." She smiles her little wobbly smile at the offended look on Dustin's face. "Take them or leave them," she says spritely. Dustin takes them. "Is what I thought."*

*"As much as this isn't hilarious," Lucas breaks in, unwinding himself from Max and turning to face the newcomers. "Max says there is something serious you guys have to tell us?" An honestly concerned look crosses his face. "You aren't breaking up, are you? Because we're all going with Will in the divorce."*

*Mike allows himself a moment to react to Lucas' silly joke, pretending to be betrayed and laying his hand over his heart with a wounded noise, before he nudges Will and El forwards. "Tell them," he whispers. "It's killing me watching the two of you falling apart over this. Maybe they can offer up some ideas for what's really going on."*

*Somewhat reluctantly, Will and El tell Max, Lucas, and Dustin about the dreams, starting with the very first one in October, and ending with the one from the night before. For once, they get through the entire story without a single interruption, the six of them sitting in a squashed,*

*lopsided circle on the soft grass with El and Will at the ‘head’, intently listening as they explain how realistic the dreams feel, how scared they are when they wake up. “I feel like I’m choking,” Will whispers, his hand drifting up to brush over his throat. “Like there’s water in my lungs.”*

*“Rotten water,” El adds, her hands fisted in her dress’ skirt as she stares down at her knees. “Dead water.” She looks up suddenly, her eyes clouded with what almost looks like fear. “Feels like the Upside Down.”*

*Dustin mutters, “Shit,” and scoots forwards a little, intense eyes fixed on them. “Do you think the dreams are coming from there? From the Upside Down?”*

*Wrapping his arms around himself, a phantom chill ghosting over his skin, Will replies, “We don’t know. We think maybe?” He glances at El as if asking her a question, and she nods minutely. “Once, we saw the monster,” he breathes, picking at his shoelaces. “It saw us in the dark, and its head split open like a giant flower, and all the petals were covered with thousands of teeth.”*

*There’s a sharp hiss of, “Demogorgon,” from everyone present.*

*“Giant Demogorgon,” El says (now where have you seen one of those before, Eleven?) her voice hushed. “Old and evil.” And then, explanation over and with nothing more to say, the party falls into edgy silence, broken only by Dustin devouring the sandwiches, face lined as he tries to think of an answer.*

*“The gate,” Dustin says around a swallow after several minutes. “What if there’s a crack in the gate?”*

*Mike’s top lip curls uncomfortably. “What do you mean?”*

*“Think about it,” Dustin starts, leaning back on his hand and brushing crumbs off his shirt with the other, ignoring Lucas’ protests when they scatter over his legs. “You say you’re seeing darkness, screaming kids, and a giant Demogorgon, right?” He doesn’t wait for an affirmative before continuing. “But also a paper boat, and other kids’ toys, and a sign post with streets on it that none of us have ever heard of.” Dustin inclines his head in that way he does when he thinks the answers should be as obvious to everyone else as they are to him. “Son of a bitch,” he mutters when all*

*he receives are blank stares. “What if they aren’t dreams? What if they’re memories. Like, El’s memories from the lab, or... or Will’s memories from that time he got lost in the woods.” He looks around at them. “Come on guys! The two people with super powers from a freaking alternate dimension are having weird connected dreams, and it didn’t occur to any one of you that they might have something to do with the Upside Down?!”*

*Stretching his legs out to rub his foot over El’s calf comfortingly when her shoulders start to tremble, Mike mutters, “Yes, because we really wanted to consider that as an explanation.”*

*“What are you thinking?” Lucas asks Dustin suspiciously when he turns his head and can practically see the gears turning in Dustin’s head. “You’re planning something dumb and potentially dangerous, aren’t you?”*

*“...Me?” Dustin asks incredulously, batting Max away with a laugh when she reaches across Lucas to swat at his shoulder with pursed lips. “Slander. I would never do that.” He then coughs pointedly, stubbornly looking away into the distance as he speaks. “But I do think we should make sure that the gateway is closed. And also see if we can find any information about Brenner’s experiments while we’re there, because I know Will and El will never admit to it, but they have both wanted to know what the fuck is going on with them since they were thirteen.” Will chokes on his next breath and El freezes mid-sway, both of them fixing owl-like gazes on Dustin, who flushes a faint pink and starts ripping the grass up beside his thigh. “Sorry, I overstepped,” he whispers.*

*El regains her ability to move, and she crawls across the circle to throw her arms around Dustin’s shoulders. “No,” she says softly, pulling back and holding him firmly with both hands on either side of his face. “You are right.”*

*Long limbs flailing, Will tries not to knee Mike in the stomach as he scrambles to join in the hug, wedging himself under El’s arms to wrap Dustin up tightly, knocking his cap off in the process. Max scoops it up and settles it on Lucas’ head with a grin and a wink. “Guess we aren’t too good at hiding anything, are we?” Will mumbles, smiling shyly at Dustin. “You’re always looking out for us.”*

*“Well, someone has to,” Dustin says, touched by his friends’ affections. “Mike is great at looking after you, but even he needs a little bit of help,*

*sometimes.”*

*“That’s an understatement,” Mike says, voice so fond he is almost disgusted at himself. “But, Dustin, do you have any idea how difficult finding out any of that information is going to be? How are we even supposed to get down to the gate? -it’s in a deep pit, in a destroyed basement, in a locked building, on an alarmed ex-government compound!”*

*“Uh-buh-buh-buh.” Dustin wags his finger at Mike, effectively reprieving them of the heavy mood as Lucas snorts and the sound of bright giggles ring out from the six of them, echoing off the waterfall and disappearing into the trees. “Haven’t you people realised yet that I always have a plan?” And he explains to them, in rather concerning detail, just how – exactly – they are going to not just get down to the gateway, but also into the rest of the building to scour for information that, in Dustin’s words, ‘we should have been looking for years ago, honestly, are none of you even the least bit curious about the other ten people involved in the experiments?’ “Who are they – where are they – and do they have super powers too?” He gets a little lost on a tangent until Lucas smacks him in the arm with his own hat.*

*“Just how long have you been planning this extremely detailed and completely non-spontaneous plan, then, oh great and mighty Bard?” Mike asks sarcastically when Dustin is finally finished his explanation and various tangents, complete with diagrams scratched into the dirt and a small pile of rocks being nudged around to represent the party. He narrows his eyes at Dustin, trying not to let his stern expression crack when Will buries his smiling face into Mike’s neck to hide his giggles at the sheepish look Dustin is now sporting*

*Dustin rubs the back of his neck and whips his hat off Lucas’ head. “A little while,” he allows demurely, folding his hands neatly around his hat. “Maybe a year or two, maybe a bit longer, who knows?”*

*“This is why you wanted to keep that dead Demodog, isn’t it?” Max says, poking Dustin’s knee. “You thought it would help you find a way in, didn’t you?”*

*“No,” Dustin replies, almost defensively, and then he sighs. “Yes.” He waves off the laughter caused by his admittance, and says, “Trust me, guys. This plan is going to work. We’re going to find out what’s making*

*Will and El lose sleep, and I can finally close my curiosity door on what the hell was going on inside that lab.*

*El snorts. “All about you,” she says with a fond eyeroll.*

*“Of course,” Dustin beams. “Just you wait.”*

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## **Present Day**

Jonathan Byers is not a large man, but when he storms into the hospital, the raw emotions coursing out of him causes him to take up the entire corridor. His feet fall on the linoleum with terrified swiftness, his hand sliding from Nancy's grip as he picks up speed the closer to the reception desk the two get, Nancy's heels clicking sharply as she keeps pace with him. Approaching the desk, Jonathan pauses his stampede briefly, opening his mouth to ask the woman behind it – who looks quite started by his sudden appearance – the all-important question (*where is Steve? is he okay? WHERE IS STEVE?!*), but Nancy spots her brother's long, deflated figure leaning against the wall further up the hall, and she snatches up Jonathan's arm in a tight grip and drags him until he catches on. Mike's red-rimmed eyes flicker up to them briefly when they reach him, and he glances away seconds later, a soft sob bubbling out as his cheeks turn red in shame.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, his hands balled up in his shirt hem. “I’m sorry, Nancy. We made a mistake.” For the first time in her life, Nancy can’t bring herself to spare a thought for her brother’s tears, a brief touch to his shoulder all she can offer before Jonathan pulls on her hand and they burst into the hospital room, Mike’s small, “We didn’t mean to,” sounding just before the door slams shut behind them.

Steve is laid out on the hospital gurney, hooked up to so many machines Jonathan can’t even count them all in his panicked state, staring up at the ceiling with alien, silvery-grey eyes. Nancy swears he isn’t even touching the mattress, hovering half an inch off the sheets one second, and sinking into them stiffly the next. One of Steve’s hands is resting on his shallowly rising chest, the other is

being clutched onto tightly by Dustin, who Jonathan has only just noticed is kneeling uncomfortably on the tiled floor beside the bed, his hat discarded behind him and his cheek pressed into the mattress. He is fitfully asleep, fingers occasionally tightening on Steve's hand.

"Why is he covered in blood?" Nancy whispers, wide eyes chasing over the bright red splashes covering the parts of Dustin's arms and face she can see.

"Doesn't matter." Jonathan's voice hitches on the words and he stumbles forwards and collapses by the bed, shaking hands running over Steve's arm and touching his pale cheek. "Steve?" he whispers. "Steve, are you in there?"

"Stevie..." Nancy's voice joins Jonathan's plea as she perches hesitantly on the side of the bed, her hands balled up on Steve's knees. "Can you hear us?" Both fall silent for a moment, lost for words, and then a whine slides out of Nancy's throat, and suddenly she's choking on a harsh sob, clapping her hands over her mouth when the sound causes Dustin to jolt awake, flailing backwards onto his butt with wild eyes. "I'm sorry!" she exclaims, and Jonathan reaches up to pull her head down to his shoulder, tears splashing down his own cheeks.

Dustin waves them off without a word, crawling back to the bedside and reattaching himself to Steve's hand.

The room door opens with a squeak, and Nancy peeks out over Jonathan's shoulder as a rather frazzled nurse makes her presence known with a small, pointed cough. "Mr Henderson," she says in a voice that indicates what she is about to say is something she may possibly have said several times already. "For the third time in as many hours, please join the rest of your friends in the waiting room so law enforcement can come and take your statements. And take Mr Wheeler with you. All of your parents have been contacted to come and collect you when the police have finished with their questions." She levels her eyes on Dustin, who looks ready to stubbornly protest being removed from Steve's side. "Mr Henderson do *not* force me to involve security, you are in enough trouble as it is."

"Fucking fine," Dustin mutters under his breath, standing abruptly.

Jonathan's eyes are drawn to the bright red streaks left behind on the white bed linen from Dustin's blood-splattered clothing. "Can't you do something about the blood?" he croaks as Dustin is collecting his hat, backpack, and other belongings he had scattered around the bed.

Fixing him with a stern, yet condescending look, the nurse says, "I understand Mr Harrington is a very close friend to you, Jonathan—" the Byers family are well known in the hospital now, after everything that has happened to them, "-but you don't need to indulge Mr Henderson, or any of his other friends, in their fanciful stories. I have been dealing with Miss Hopper and the younger Mr Byers rabbiting on about blood for the better part of two hours."

Jonathan and Nancy share loaded looks, Jonathan's attention now split between Steve and his wife, their eyes flicking back and forth from each other, the blood on the sheets, and the blood they can clearly see on Dustin, who catches their gazes and just shakes his head in defeat. "Leave it," he mouths. "They can't see." And they watch him be sullenly lead out of the room by the borderline-irate nurse.

"What the hell?" Jonathan breathes. "What the *hell* is going on?"

Nancy shrugs her shoulders under Jonathan's hand, sucking her bottom lip in between her teeth. Before she can say anything, a soft sigh escapes Steve's mouth, and they both startle to attention, facing him in the same movement. They deflate almost instantly when they realise nothing has changed – Steve is still just staring. Staring, staring, staring, at something not even he can actually see. Alone in the room, with only the comatose Steve and his army of machinery for company, Nancy and Jonathan don't bother trying to stifle their emotions as they sit vigilant beside their partner for signs of any change.

On his way out of the room, after one last regretful look at Steve, Dustin grabs onto Mike's arm and starts tugging him back towards the waiting area, pausing briefly by the vending machine to wipe Mike's tears away and pull his friend into a tight hug. "It's not your fault," he murmurs to Mike as the two clutch at each other. Dustin can feel tears pricking his own eyes, *again*, and he presses his face into Mike's shoulder as Mike's forehead bumps against Dustin's

cheek, his hands clenched in the back of Dustin's shirt.

"It is," Mike whimpers, and he's shaking, and Dustin realises that Mike has been holding it together for Will and El's sake since they left Hawkins Laboratory. "Did you see her face? I did that, I did that to Nancy!"

Dustin claps a hand to the back of Mike's neck and holds on comfortingly. "No you, didn't," he chokes. They're both crying properly now. "You didn't, Mike. No one could have guessed that... *that* was going to happen." He pulls back, and they both scrub at their faces for a second. "If it's anyone's fault, it's mine. It was *my* plan and I – don't shake your head at me, Wheeler!" It's almost impossible for either of them to get words out, but Mike is trying to protest Dustin's fault in what happened at the lab. "I don't even *know* what happened – none of this is possible! – and that's coming from someone who watched his cat get eaten by a baby Demogorgon that had a soft spot for nougat!" It gets a watery chuckle out of the both of them, and Dustin claps Mike on the chest before swinging his arm around his friend's shoulders and starting to lead him towards the waiting area again. "Don't let it get to you," he says quietly, sniffling a little. "We need our Paladin to boss us around or this fire? It's going to turn into the biggest fucking frypan."

"God," Mike hiccoughs, and then they reach the waiting area.

It's a sorry sight, Lucas trying to mop up the blood on his skin with a small packet of tissues, glancing nervously at the doors every few seconds as if he has a tic, waiting for Max to make an appearance after haring away from Hawkins Laboratory in Steve's police cruiser to get her mysterious 'back up'. Beside him, slumped together and haggard looking, Will and El are almost falling off their chairs, eyes drooping with exhaustion. The blood on their faces – tracks of it from their noses, ears, and even their eyes, splitting their faces into plains – had been the only blood the hospital staff were able to see, fussing over them with wipes and bandages and wanting to whisk them off for scans, thinking they had some form of head injury. Sighing shakily, Mike slouches over to them and drops down onto the floor between them, his spine curved into Will's calf as he leans his head on El's knee, squeezing his eyes shut, and his tense shoulders only relax when he feels a familiar hand in his hair, Will carefully

untangling his matted curls as El absently strokes Mike's cheek. Dustin sits heavily on Lucas' other side, his eyes fixed up the hall towards Steve's room.

The only thing that manages to draw his attention away from the hallway and that one just-out-of-sight door, is the hospital doors slamming open once again, to admit Hopper and Joyce, each in varying states of panic and worry, with Max trailing behind them, partially wiped clean but still covered in sticky, half-dried blood. She breaks into a sprint and outruns the adults to jump into Lucas' arms when he stands up to meet her. El struggles to sit upright, both Mike and Will attempting to help her before Hopper descends on her, sweeping her up into a bone crushing hug with his chin pressed hard into the top of her head (*he almost lost his girl again, and he wouldn't have even known*) and his eyes forced shut against the painful thumping of his heart as she clutches at his arms and buries her face in his neck, her shoulders shaking. Joyce pulls on Will's arm and tucks herself against him, long used to both her sons towering over her, putting her hand tenderly on the back of his neck as he breathes shakily into her hair.

Mike knows that it would be worryingly strange if his own mother showed up, so he hovers behind them, twisting his fingers together and wondering why his chest suddenly feels so tight (*sometimes you just really need a hug from your mom*) and he jumps, startled, when a thin hand wraps carefully around his wrist with a small, but firm, tug, and he is being pulled into the Byers' hug too. Will's arm settles around Mike's waist as Joyce holds them both tightly to her, trying to offer as much comfort as she has to give.

An acidic cough from the same nurse as before breaks everyone apart, but before she can even think about starting to speak, Hopper approaches her with his stern, Chief Jim Hopper face on, hand resting pointedly on the grip of his gun. "I'm taking them from here," he informs her, continuing to smoothly talk over her as she starts sputtering about 'statements' and 'hospital records'. "I am taking them from here, back to the station, for *police* records, because there's a *police officer* currently laying comatose in your hospital bed!" None of the teenagers miss the way his jaw tightens dangerously and his fingers start to tremble where his free hand is hanging loosely at his

side. “Now, get me whatever I need to leave with these delinquents without any further hassle.” Hopper stares the nurse down when her face gets a little mulish, his eyes hard and unmoving. Even Joyce can’t tell if he is mad, or worried, or maybe even a bit of both. “Please.”

Hopper watches the nurse scramble around the desk in strained silence, his face carefully neutral until he has a handful of paperwork and an apology being stammered at him.

“Let’s go,” Hopper says brusquely as he turns back to the shaken, apologetic teenagers. “Everyone in the car, right now.” And, with that, he marches back towards the doors, heading out into the parking lot. “Come on!” he calls over his shoulder, voice hard, when he looks over to them and notices that no one has moved.

Blinking herself back into the present, El grabs Mike’s hand, following her father as Mike takes up Will’s hand as he’s brought along after her. She wraps her free hand into Max’s sleeve to get her and Lucas moving, leaving Joyce to trot after them, eyes still focused on the back of her son’s head worriedly. “Dustin?” El asks softly, mirroring Hopper perfectly as she casts a glance backwards. “Dustin, are you coming?”

Standing in front of the chair he had just vacated, Dustin doesn’t seem to have any desire to leave the hospital at all, his cheeks sucked in and his hands balled up in the pockets of his jacket, bag strung over his shoulders. “I can’t leave,” he says quietly, eyes flicking up the hallway again. “Steve-”

“Steve isn’t going anywhere,” Joyce murmurs softly, breaking away from Mike and Will and turning to Dustin. Her eyes are warm and empathetic as she puts one of her arms around Dustin, heedless of his backpack, and Dustin, who – although not as tall as either of the Byers children – dwarfs her tiny stature, hesitantly raises his own arm to allow her closer access. “We need to take you kids home and clean you up,” she tells him in that firm, motherly tone that offers no refuting or rebuttal, “and then we can get to the bottom of all this.” As she speaks, she starts leading Dustin away from the chair and towards the rest of the party, standing before an ever-more agitated Hopper. Joyce notices that Dustin is still casting nervously guilty

looks over his shoulder. “Dusty, I know you’re worried, but Jonathan and Nancy are in with him, looking after him, just like they have been doing for the last six years. He’s going to be just fine.”

A small whine flutters out of Dustin’s mouth, and Joyce automatically starts rubbing his arm comfortingly, the way she always does for Jonathan, the way Will does for Mike and El. “I need to be there when he wakes up,” Dustin mumbles, voice low and down-trodden. “I have to tell him that I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Dustin,” Joyce breathes, tilting her head up to look at him softly with her large, kindly understanding eyes. “This isn’t your fault. Steve would never want you to apologise for the things he gets himself into.” And she continues over him in that firm, yet gentle way mothers master to sooth upset children when there is nothing else to be done. “And right now, you know that Steve would want you to be somewhere safe, where we can talk about what happened and try to work out what the next step is.”

Reluctantly, Dustin finally allows a stiff nod, dragging his eyes away from the hallway and down to the intensely caring face of Joyce Byers. He refuses to look at any of the others as Joyce starts leading him out of the hospital and towards the carpark, and he dares not glance up at Hopper as Dustin climbs into the back of Joyce’s Pinto, the big man almost standing guard beside his police wagon. Hopper’s steely eyes fix hawklike on the rest of the party as they, withdrawn and shamefaced, file out of the building, hands linked and arms around each other. The teenagers miss the silent conversation that passes between Hopper’s eyebrows and Joyce’s wide eyes, and the way Hopper’s expression changes in an instant, the anger melting off him in a steady stream, replaced with worry and fear before he sits heavily in the wagon and starts the engine.

Silent night is the only witness to their sombre parade making its way up the Byers’ overgrown driveway, a police wagon, a green Pinto, a rusty convertible, and a lone motorbike.

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Steam curls off Max’s pinked skin from the overly-hot shower as she sits beside El on Will’s bed, her shaking hands wrapped tightly

around something she is keeping hidden from El's line of sight in her lap. Not saying a word, El tips her head onto the other girl's shoulder, hooking her foot under Max's calf and wrapping her fingers around Max's arm to stop them trembling. Minutes pass. They hear the shower start up again, one of the boys stepping in, and the low hum of tentative conversation reaching them from the kitchen. "Your hair. What happened to it?" El asks quietly, voice a hoarse whisper, her eyes flicking up to where the still-wet strands of Max's hair are sticking to the tops of her freckled shoulders, both girls wearing old nightgowns left in the house by Nancy Wheeler over the years.

Almost a whole foot of Max's once waist-length hair had been lost to the... the *thing* that attacked them on the roof of Hawkins Lab, the ends rough and jagged and so thoroughly washed in the shower her hair is squeaky to the touch. The back of Max's head throbs with a dull ache from the force of Lucas sheering her braid off. "Lucas saved my life," she tells El, almost reverently, reaching up with one hand to brush at her neck, shoving her mystery object further down between her knees as she does. "Something grabbed me, and Lucas saved me."

"A much better story than Rapunzel," El mutters absently. Max snorts at the comment, a half-hearted smile gracing her face. Hopper and El have been working their way through the Grimm's Fairy Tales the past few months – El claims she understands the actions of people in the black-and-white morality of Fairy Tales far better than she does the actions of people in the morally grey world she lives in. El runs her fingers through Max's hair, the dark-with-water red starkly vibrant against the white scars on her hands. "Did you get hurt?"

Max shakes her head. "Not enough to keep me down. The blood shook me for a while, but that's nothing I'm not used to." They both share tiny knowing grins, quickly wiped away by the mounting sorrow in the room. Max gently pulls her arm from El's grip and wraps it around her friend's waist. "I..." she pauses, her breath hitching as she fiddles with the thing she has hidden in her lap. "When we were looking through the corridors, we found this room. A nursery."

"Rainbow Room." El's voice is emotionless, breath puffing over Max's chin.

“Yeah,” Max confirms, and she brings her hand up, palm flattened. “I found this in a crate. I think it’s yours.”

El blinks slowly at the stuffed toy Max is offering to her, her eyes widening slightly. The expression makes her face look years younger, giving Max a glimpse into what her friend must have looked like as a very small child. In Max’s hand sits the stuffed turtle she pulled from the Rainbow Room, in all its greyed-fabric, missing-flipper glory. She gave it a wash in the shower, soaping the dust and grime and dried spots of blood off it, drying it carefully with a towel, still questioning whether giving it back to El is a good idea. Now, seeing the wonder on El’s face, Max thinks it just might have been. She tips the toy towards El, the girl’s hands quickly cupping to catch it.

“I saw a picture of you with it, and I thought you might like it back,” Max says after a few seconds of silence, suddenly unsure of herself again. She worries her lip between her teeth, hyper-aware of the itch against her skin as her hair starts to dry with nothing else to focus on other than the look on El’s face. “Do you...? Was I wrong?”

Whether El uses her powers or Max is really just that tired, El is abruptly wrapped around Max in a full body hug, her knees going everywhere, and her hands jammed between Max’s shoulder blades as she presses her face into Max’s neck. “Thank you, Max,” she breathes, squeezing the turtle tightly, irrationally afraid that Doctor Brenner (*not Papa, never Papa again*) is going to appear and take it off her again, drag her away from the one place she feels safe and put her in isolation. She knows now that the sole toy she had been allowed is called a turtle, and she also knows that there is something very important about that fact, but she just can’t ever put her finger on why. *“Thank you.”*

Max throws her arms around El and returns the embrace until it’s almost painful. “It was nothing,” she says, truly meaning it. Max is glad that she could cheer her friend up after such a harrowing day – it’s actually making Max herself feel a little less desolate about the entire situation – and she presses a small grin into El’s shoulder where the tanned point of it is digging into Max’s chin. “I’m just happy I could get you something back from them.”

The door hinge squeaks, and Max flicks her eyes up to see Lucas

standing in the doorway, dressed too in borrowed clothes – possibly Will's or possibly something Jonathan left behind when he moved out with Nancy and Steve, as the Byers' boys ended up sharing a wardrobe after Will hit six feet – and he can barely offer her the ghost of a smile before guilt clouds his face, his grim eyes fixated on her hair. Lucas looks away before Max can say something, *anything* to reassure him that she would rather be alive than have her hair intact. Sensing the sudden tension in the room, El slides off Max's lap and back onto the mattress, turning her head to look at Lucas. "You saved her," El tells Lucas firmly, Lucas' guilt so plain on his face even El has no trouble picking up on it. "*You saved her.*" (*You saved me, El. You saved me! Mike's voice echoes in her head, warming her from the inside out.*)

"Yeah..." Lucas mumbles, shuffling into the room. Max finally manages to catch his eye, and she nods firmly, the knot in her chest easing significantly when Lucas' face relaxes. "Yeah, I did." With more confidence, he strides across Will's small room and takes a seat on Max's other side, carding his fingers through her hair and bumping his forehead to hers. "And I'll do it over and over again until things stop trying to kill my girlfriend."

Max rolls her eyes at him, tilts her face up to kiss him. "Thank you, Stalker," she whispers.

"Oh, I see how it is," Will croaks from the door, leaning on the frame heavily as his entire body seems to sag and droop with palpable tiredness (*what's weighing you down, Willy-boy? guilt?*). "I leave the room to get some more blankets and you all move into my bed." Mike appears next to Will, laden with said blankets. "Come on, Max, shift over." Moving together, down to the drooping of their weary eyes, Will and Mike shuffle across the room, Mike settling between Max and El as Will starts fussing with the blankets.

Sensing the absence of his partner-in-crime like a missing limb, Lucas tips his head back to ask Will, "Where's Dustin at?" carefully, frowning when he realises he can't remember seeing Dustin at all since they got to the Byers' house, leaving their eclectic collection of transport parked haphazardly in front of the porch. "Is he still having a shower?" Which would be strange, because Dustin was the least bloody out of all of them, but, then again – and Lucas is rationalising

with himself now, attempting to ward off those intrusive thoughts that threaten to keep him awake until the early hours full of ‘what if’ and ‘why didn’t’ – Dustin is also inarguably the most upset about Steve and also the most likely to cry his feelings out under the hot water so as not to burden anyone else with his problems.

Will and Mike share a loaded look as Will drapes a blanket around Max and Lucas, Mike’s face drawn and tight where Will’s is softly sympathetic. Will brushes his fingers through Max’s hair absently and flashes an encouraging smile at her when she glances up at him. When Mike looks away without saying anything, bottom lip caught between his teeth as his ears and the apples of his cheeks turn slightly pink with shame, Will says, “He’s in the living room with Mom and Hop, making sure that they know that he’s the one who came up with the plan.” He swallows audibly. “That this was all his idea.”

“He’s going to take all the blame?” Max mutters in disbelief, jaw dropping slightly when Will nods. “And you’re *letting him?*” Her face turns hard and protective when Will’s head dips down again, looking highly reluctant to be giving her confirmation. Max pulls out of the gentle hold Lucas has on her and stands, determined to march into the living room and make sure the adults know that there’s blame to be shared amongst the entire party, from fleshing out the shakier details to providing the tools, the time, and the getaway vehicles. Halfway to the door, an arm around her ribcage stops her, and Max narrows her eyes at the door, hands coming up without looking to grab at a pointy elbow and bony wrist, uncovered for once by a short-sleeved shirt from the depths of Will’s draws instead of the usual sweater. “Let me go, Mike,” Max growls lowly. She didn’t even realise he’d moved off the bed after her. “I am not letting Dustin take the fall for this.”

“Let it go, Max,” Mike says in resignation. “We’ve already tried.” When Max tilts her head, she can see just how much he hates the situation on his face. “He won’t let us. He... God, he feels so *guilty*.” A tear drips off Mike’s lashes, splashing hot on Max’s shoulder. His voice shakes. “He blames himself for everything that happened at the lab, what happened to *Steve*, but there’s nothing he can do about it, and. And. He just... wants to protect us now, because he didn’t then.”

Max can feel his chest hitching against her back. “He didn’t then.”

Max whines, turning to hug Mike before she starts crying too, her chin digging into his collar bone. “He’s so stupid,” Max huffs, frowning over Mike’s shoulder and seeing El and Lucas sporting identical expressions. Will is still trying to keep himself busy, hovering by his desk as he anxiously straightens his markers and sketchbooks, previously already stacked into neat piles and containers. “How could he think we’d blame him? That anyone would blame him?” Familiar arms are suddenly around her, a solid warmth against her side as Lucas envelopes Max and Mike in a tight hug. “No one blames Dustin, right?”

“Never,” El says firmly, worming her way under Mike’s arm to wedge between Mike’s chest and Max’s. “Never ever.”

Their impromptu group hug (*not complete without Dustin, never complete if someone is missing*) is topped off as Will finally decrees his desk tidy and drapes himself over Mike’s back, one arm around Lucas’ shoulders and the other somehow encasing Max and El in the same breadth. They stand like that in silence for several seconds, until a sixth pair of arms appears, one around Lucas’s waist and the other brushing Max’s hair out of the way so a warm forehead can rest against her neck. “Thanks, guys,” Dustin whispers hoarsely, words whistling over his gums and nubby teeth, the plastic ones in a glass of water on Joyce’s kitchen sink. He lets out a watery chuckle. El can feel him trembling against her, and she shifts her leg to wrap her foot around his ankle, her arms trapped between Max’s stomach and her own chest. “They didn’t believe it was all my doing anyway.”

“Course they didn’t,” Mike warbles, picking his head up and making that face at Dustin over Max’s head, that face that says ‘you’re such an idiot, but you’re *my* idiot, and I can’t believe you thought you would get away with this stupidity’. “You idiot.”

Max starting to giggle uncontrollably breaks them all apart as she falls against Lucas’ chest.

“So, the turtle went down well, then?” Dustin asks when he spots the stuffed toy in El’s hand, her arm hooked around Mike’s neck comfortably, the soft material of the turtle brushing Will’s cheek as

he lays his head tiredly on Mike's shoulder. He grins his toothless grin – even if it is lacking its usual sunshine – when El nods in her simplistic way, her fingers tightening around the toy ever-so-slightly. “Lucas, did you give her the other things?”

“Not yet,” Lucas replies, eyes flicking sideways in lieu of a full eyeroll, shaking his head. “I was gonna wait for a more appropriate moment than *three hours after everything happened*, but now that you've brought it up, I guess I have no choice.” As Lucas extracts himself reluctantly from Max's side and walks across Will's room, Dustin shrugs with an air of ‘what can you do?’ both of them breaking out into tiny grins when Lucas faux-punches him in the shoulder on his way passed. “Here, El,” Lucas' voice is soft as he reaches into his bloodstained bag and pulls two manila folders out. Their distressed edges are splashes with fresh blood over the dark brown already dried to the paper. “We found these in the Rainbow Room too.” He approaches the bed, El perched across Mike's lap on the mattress with Will stretched out behind them, body curled in towards the two with his hands stretched out as is if ready to protect them. El settles her turtle carefully on Mike's knee as she reaches out for the folders. “This one is about Kali,” Lucas whispers, handing her one.

“Sister...” El breathes, her eyes snapping open from their flickering, half-closed tired position. She takes the folder with both hands, trailing her eyes over the label on the front. “What about that?” she asks after a pause, looking back to the second folder. “Another sister? Brother?”

Lucas shakes his head. “*You*.”

“Me?” El whispers, Kali's folder sliding to the floor and spreading over the carpet as she takes her own from Lucas' hands. She opens the cover with shaking hands and freezes when she sees the same photo Max had found, herself and her stuffed turtle – she hadn't even *known* it was called a turtle at the time – and her breath sticks in her lungs. “Me...”

*The cabin is more of a home to her than anything Eleven has ever had in*

*her entire life, warmer than the Rainbow Room, and more comforting than her isolated bedroom. Hopper had cleaned, dusted, and put up a bed for her months ago, when he had returned from the Upside Down after explaining to her about the second gate, and had been maintaining it for the three hundred and thirty days between then and now, filling it with a games and toys and food. After the first night, where she had fallen asleep in his cruiser, and proceeded to sleep through the entire day, he had told her that the Bad Men had suddenly renewed their search for her.*

*“You must have set their machines off when you broke back through,” he told her quietly. “So we’re just going to lay low here for a little while until they back off again.” And after that, he looks after her, shows her how to use the shower, work the TV, and turn the toaster on so she can toast her own waffles. He teaches her words, and math, and he brings her an old globe to show her the world, her eyes wide and bright as she looks at all the countries she never even knew existed.*

*“What is ocean?” she had asked on the fourth day, properly awake now after sleeping for hours, and eager to learn and see new things, fingers trailing over the painted blue surface of something called ‘Pacific Ocean’. Hopper told her about the salty water and the sand, and promised to take her to the beach during the summer when she had nearly exploded with excitement at the thought of poking through rock pools and building a sandcastle. She has a new appreciation for free living, willing to spend a few more weeks waiting to see her friends again if it means the Bad Men stop looking for her.*

*She still has the fried radio given to her by Hopper, and although he offers to replace it with a new one, Eleven won’t let him, comfortable with the way her fingers fit into the dips and rivets in the burnt plastic casing, and confident that she can hear Mike talking to her through it every night. Eleven knows that Mike knows she is back in Hawkins – Will had felt her proximity and delightedly informed the rest of the party. Eleven is only isolated in the cabin for just over a week, because Will Byers – shivering and soaked to the bone with rain but all bright grins and shiny eyes despite his sunken, tired appearance – shows up on the doorstep one night, having been unable to sleep and wanting to finally meet her on this physical plane, following their strange, fledgling link directly to the cabin. Hopper is a little cautious, afraid the youngest Byers child will be caught venturing out into the woods, especially with him still under such close*

*watch by the occupants of Hawkins Laboratory, and knowing that Joyce would be terrified at the idea of Will walking around at night on his own.*

*Hopper allows the boy inside long enough for the children to grasp hands, before he ushers Will towards the car with an apologetic look. On the road back to the Byers' a deal is struck – Will is allowed to carry notes backwards and forwards from the cabin to the rest of their friends once a week. When the scrutiny and search for Eleven has died down, the party can come over as much as they please.*

*Will brings Eleven an essay from Mike the first time he comes back, and she cries twice while reading it, struggling to write her own reply before Hopper takes pity on her, and allows her to radio the boy. They talk for hours and hours, well into the morning, and Mike's voice is husky by the time Will, sitting patiently with him in the basement and handing him tissues, quietly tells him he needs to sleep. Eleven goes to bed with a smile so wide her face almost hurts. If just talking to Mike makes her this happy, seeing him face to face might just make her heart explode.*

*Her friends tell her about something called a madmax in their second letter, and it takes Eleven several re-reads and a quick conference with Hopper to work out that a madmax is actually a girl named Max, who is a new student at the school. According to the section in Mike's barely-legible scrawl, Lucas and Dustin have apparently both taken a shine to her, while Mike himself seems quite on the fence about her. Will helpfully provides a small drawing of Max, in charcoal and red pencil. Eleven is intrigued, and fantasises about what meeting this no-shit-taking, 'skateboarding' girl could be like. She wonders if Max would even like her – would she like Max? Nancy Wheeler is the only other girl Eleven has ever met outside the few other female children she vaguely remembers from her childhood in the Rainbow Room.*

*On day twenty four of her stay in the cabin – three hundred and fifty three days since she last saw Mike face to face – Will doesn't show up. So, Hopper tells her about Hallowe'en, and promises that, next year, he will personally make sure she is the best costumed kid in the town, after her impromptu sheet ghost doesn't go over too well. Eleven likes the idea of staying with Hopper, who is kind to her, and understanding. Yes, they fight sometimes – once, they screamed at each other, slamming doors and shattering windows, because Eleven wanted to see Mike, now! – but Eleven rationalises that it might just be their individual inexperience*

*coming out; Hopper's from his own past and hangups on family, which Eleven still knows next to nothing about, save for the blue cloth bracelet Hopper always wears, and her own lack of a family her entire life, used to lashing out in defence. It takes her several weeks to realise that Hopper will not hurt her if she doesn't do as he asks. He might yell, might be disappointed, but he doesn't have a Dark Room to throw her in, will never raise a hand against her.*

*Two days after Hallowe'en, Will disappears from Eleven's head for a few seconds before reappearing, and then flickering in and out like a faulty light bulb. It terrifies her – he has been a constant soft warmth in the back of her mind for almost an entire month now, and she had so quickly grown used to his presence that she feels like she can't remember a time without him there – and so she breaks Hopper's only rule, and leaves the cabin in search of him. Hopper hasn't been home much recently, either – he explained to her that there have been some strange things happening with the local crops, and his curiosity is piqued – and she is bored to tears.*

*Eleven makes it to the school with only a few hiccoughs along the way – interrupting that mother and her child is going to come back to haunt her, she just knows it – but eventually she is creeping hesitantly in through the back door. Her heart pounding (don't think about last time, don't picture the blood on the floor, don't look at the wall, clear of holes and slime) she tiptoes along the unfamiliar corridors, trying desperately to pick out that energy that is purely Will's out of all the children she can sense in the building. Halfway through the school, Eleven is side-tracked by her mind suddenly screaming Mike, Mike, Mike, Mike! at her, and she turns her head. Her breath sticks in her throat when she looks through a glass-paned door, and there he is. Mike, wrapped in a cozy-looking sweater, standing in the room her friends had called 'gym'.*

*She has to fight the urge to just burst in and throw her arms around him – and in that moment, it feels like one of the hardest things she has ever done – because she doesn't want to draw attention to herself, and she has just noticed there is someone else in the gym with Mike. A girl in brightly coloured clothes with beautiful red hair is circling Mike slowly on a strange, wheeled-board. "Max," Eleven whispers, her eyebrows raising. Will had done an excellent job of his drawing of the girl, even managing to capture her blue-eyed determined expression, and Eleven wonders what Will would capture in a drawing of her. Max and Mike appear to be*

*talking amicably as Max rolls around, which seems contradictory to how Will had explained the strange dichotomy between Mike and the new addition to the party, and Eleven feels a sharp pang in her chest.*

*Although glad that Mike is smiling, she wishes she could be the one on the other end of it.*

*Before she can decide whether or not she is going to enter the gym, and finally have her reunion with Mike after waiting for so long, Will screams in her head, his high voice cracking and breaking over every word as he sound more and more desolate. GO AWAY! GO AWAY! GO AWAY! Eleven claps her hands over her ears as if that will help drown out Will's horrible screaming, and she gasps when that zing rocks through her again. The last time that happened, she had shattered every single piece of glassware in the cabin. There's a loud clatter inside the gym, and Eleven is horrified when her head jerks up and she sees Max and Mike sprawled on the ground, looking shocked, Mike already moving to help Max upright with wide eyes. Wiping the blood off her face hastily, Eleven pulls Max's board back towards her and Mike's head snaps around, realisation dawning on him. By the time he looks towards the door, Eleven has already reluctantly dragged herself away from the gym, following Will's screams through the school.*

*She crouches by the stairs, out of sight of all the people still lingering in the school building, and watches Will convulsing on the wide grassy field, his mother, and the rest of his friends frantically gathered around him, until strong arms descend around her, a hand gently covers her mouth before she can scream. "It's me," Hopper whispers just as she is about to start panicking. "Get in the car. We have to get back to the cabin." Neither of them want to leave Will in that state, but Hopper whispers that the mother she had talked to earlier in the day had rang the police. "Come on."*

*Just as they're climbing into the car, Eleven feels her bond with Will snap completely, her head cracking against the window as she jerks sideways, and Hopper barely gets the car started before she dissolves into terrified shrieks, yelling Will's name over and over with her arms wrapped around her head until they reach the cabin, and Hopper carries her inside, desperately trying to calm her down to ask what happened. She tries to voice the feeling, but words fail her short of chanting, "Gone, gone, gone, gone," over and over until Hopper is forced to leave her like that to*

*answer a terrified call from Joyce, something about drawings and cold baths.*

*"I'll be back," he tells her. "Stay here. Please don't leave. Please."*

*Eleven is in so much shock, she slips back into her mind place. "Will?!" she calls out, her voice cracking in the dark and echoing off the water. "WILL?!"*

-

Jim Hopper has mastered the art of sporting both a hard stare and a worried frown at the exact same time, eyebrows so heavily furrowed with the weight of such intensely warring emotions that he sometimes thinks his face might just freeze in that expression. He levels that expression now on the sad group of forlorn teenagers before him, his chest still aching from the tightness that had taken over his entire body when the hospital had called him to inform him where the kids were, instead of Steve, who had left the station house hours before and gone radio-silent the moment he drove out of the lot. There are so many things that Hopper could say to them in this moment: how scared he was when Flo told him the hospital was on the other end of the line, how *furious* he was when a nurse informed him the kids had come from Hawkins Lab. When Max came screaming into the station, covered in blood only she and Hopper could see and shaking like a leaf, Hopper could hear Sarah's heart flatlining on a loop in his head as he sprinted across the station to hug the traumatised girl.

"Well," he sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose to avoid looking any one of them in the eye. If he looks at them directly – especially El, his *girl* – he might lose his last nerve (*whether he cries or yells at them, he'll never know*) and Joyce will look at him with *that face*. "Did you at least find anything useful when you were breaking and entering and getting my best deputy hospitalised?" He winces when the kids all draw in together slightly like wounded animals, Joyce's elbow jabbing into his ribs reproachfully, and he immediately retracts the snipe with an apology, reaching out to pat Lucas' knee, as the one who is sitting closest to the couch. "I mean..." he gestures vaguely at Mike, who is fiddling with a tape recorder, and El, who Hopper has just noticed is clutching a government issued folder tightly to her

chest. “What have you got there?”

“No,” El says defensively, half-ducking behind Mike as her fingers curl around the folder. Hopper can see the pages starting to split as she does. “Mine.” She gulps, her cheeks staining pink. “No one needs to see. Ever.”

Hopper holds his hands up in surrender reflexively, not wanting to upset her any more than she already is – the Byers’ house has had its windows refitted enough times in its lifetime. “Okay, kid. It’s alright.” He smiles at her gently until she returns the expression, eyes crinkling at the corners. “Anyone else got anything?” He wants to ask if any of them know what actually happened to Steve, if any of them know what creature or being could have possibly left the young man in such a state. “Anything at all?”

There is a ripple, slight movement across the six teens as Dustin jostles Max and Will to reach for something trapped between his body and the back of the couch, still not looking at either of the adults before him. Hopper nearly loses control of his carefully neutral expression when he sees Dustin withdraw an entire handful of files, ripped and torn in every which way, splattered with old and new blood, papers haphazardly sticking out from various angles. He recognises those files, has piles of them stashed under the floor in the cabin in dusty old boxes taped up with cracking masking tape and labelled ‘Hawkins Lab’. “We found these in the Rainbow Room,” Dustin explains slowly, both for Hopper and Joyce, and for Mike and Will, who still haven’t heard the full story of the room behind the wall. “It was all boarded up, full of kid beds and old toys and rotten bedsheets.” He gulps, nose wrinkling at the memory of the smell. “There was a cabinet in the corner. These were inside.” And he holds them out to Hopper with hands that shake only little, almost a sign of submission, or an apology of sorts.

Hopper pushes them back towards Dustin, the boy’s head jerking up in shock, blinking at Hopper in confusion. “What are they?” Hopper prompts him, pointing at the files.

“They’re about the other kids,” Max says after Dustin seems lost for words, reaching out to tap the closest cover, narrowly avoiding dipping her finger in the slowly congealing blood seeping into the

cardboard. “From the experiments. One through to Twelve.”

Finding his voice, Dustin croaks out, “Some of them. At least two were beyond salvageable. And El has hers and Kali’s.” El nods to corroborate this statement, still clutching her folder to her chest. “We were hoping to find out if any of them are still alive – and if they know anything about what happened to Will.” He peters off, fingers drumming uncomfortably on his knee until Max grabs his wrist to steady them, Lucas tossing him a reassuring look over Max’s head. “We haven’t actually looked at any of them yet.”

“Just hold onto them for another minute,” Hopper tells him, eyes drawn to Mike’s hands, the tape recorder turning over and over between his restless fingers despite the comforting arm Will has stretched over Mike’s lap. “Mike, what the hell are you playing with?”

Mike startles, and the tape recorder hits the carpeted floor with a soft thump, staying there as Mike stares at it dumbly until El retrieves it, flying it back onto Mike’s thigh with half a breath and a barely discernible twitch of her head. “Nancy’s tape recorder,” Mike whispers, settling his hand over it in almost reverent fashion. “We-” he nudges El with his elbow to indicate that she is included in that ‘we’, “-went below the foundations. For reasons.” He clears his throat, and Hopper decides not to press for more information. For now. “And El made a... Will described it as a connection with *something* in the Upside Down.”

“*What?*” Joyce sounds like she’s choking on the word, and they can practically see that awfully familiar frantic fear creeping back into her expression from half a decade previous. “*WHAT!?*” Will and El move in their fluid synchronisation as they stand from the couch and move to surround Joyce, hands on her arms as she clutches at them tightly, a fierce swell of protectiveness taking over her body as she holds onto her son, and the girl who is her daughter in all but blood and marriage. She will not let that dark place take either one of them from her again. “*What sort of connection?*”

Mike is shaking his head even before she has finished asking her question, Will mimicking the expression though his mother can’t see his face while El’s expression remains carefully blank as she flicks her

eyes to Mike's face. "We don't know," Mike tells her honestly. "But... El went into this sort of, uh, trance? I guess. When she touched the gateway." He pauses with a grimace when Hopper lets out a soft hiss at the mention of the gate. "It was scary." His leg starting to jump up and down again, Mike picks up the tape recorder and shakes it lightly – they can all hear the tape rattling around inside – inclining his head towards the worn-shiny plastic. "But I recorded her. She was speaking in this crazy language I think might be from the Upside Down. Maybe she can, I don't know, translate it." Bony shoulders shrug under his oversized shirt. "I didn't know what else to do."

"You did good, kid," Hopper reassures him before Mike starts to blabber the way he does sometimes when he is nervous. "We'll look at these files while Joyce and I make sure none of you are dying, and then we'll have some food as we listen to the–"

The phone on the wall rings.

Eight pairs of eyes dart to the white plastic casing, all of them seeming frozen between one loud trill and the next until Hopper stands abruptly and heads towards the phone. His fingers brush the receiver and a flurry of movement makes him turn his head, two voices yelling out, "DON'T ANSWER THE PHONE!" at the same time as Dustin and Will descend on the phone from either side of Hopper, pressing their hands over the receiver and holding it tightly against the wall. Breathing heavily, they share confused looks.

"What are you doing?" Dustin asks, frowning (*whatever hurt Steve came from inside the phone, he suspects that much*).

Will's affronted look is the splitting image of Joyce's. "What are you doing?" he mimics (*he can still hear that ghastly voice inside his head, whispering down the phone line*), voice slightly higher than normal with concern.

The phone continues to ring under their hands until Hopper rolls his eyes and brushes the two teenagers aside, ignoring both their attempts to cling to the receiver and their protests as he puts it to his ear. "Byers' home, Hopper speaking," he all-but-snaps, glaring at Dustin and Will to shut them up as he listens to Karen Wheeler freak out at him on the other end of the line. He pulls the phone away

while she's still talking and calls out, "Mike, it's your mother," waiting for Mike to scramble over and handing the phone off. "You two," Hopper addresses Dustin and Will as Mike takes over with his mom, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Mike blocks out the rest of the conversation as he speaks quietly. "Mom, what is it?"

"Mike? Michael?" his mom sounds frantic. "Michael?"

"Mom, I'm here," he says, brows creasing. "Mom, what's wrong?"

"Michael?!"

He pulls the phone away just enough to stare at it quizzically. Maybe there's connection problems? "Mom?"

Karen's voice grates in one of his ears, "Michael? Michael? Michael?" over and over again and Mike's heartbeat thuds in the other, suddenly at the forefront of his mind, his hand curled around the phone so tightly his nails are digging into the heel of his hand around the warm plastic, one finger on his other hand carefully hooked in the cord. He can't move.

"Michael!" And then she cuts off, the silence practically deafening before a new voice hums quietly down the line. *"Hello, Mikey. Long time no see. You're older than I remember. How's your mother these days?"*

The feeling in Mike's gut reminds him of the Upside Down tunnels, alien atmosphere sucking all the air out of lungs and permeating his throat as he tries to draw more in. That voice, that paper-thin voice like the whisper of a whisper, he recognises it from somewhere. Somewhere a long time ago, his bones turning icy in ingrained fight-or-flight response. "Who are you?" His voice hisses out like steam, trickling down his chin. Mike feels like he's been punched in the stomach. Why can't he move? -why has no one noticed he can't move? "Where's my mom?" His ear stings where it's pressed to the phone, and Mike winces.

"At home, of course," the voice tells him. It's strange. Mike can't hear

any static, feedback, or white noise in the speaker, like the voice is inside the phone itself. “*You should go home to her, Mikey. Go home and tell her to come back. Come back to the quarry.*” There’s a bloodcurdling giggle, the hair on Mike’s bare arms raising off his skin. “*Tell her Nancy wants to float with her. She’s been waiting in the river such a long time for Karen to come back for her.*”

“Nancy?” Mike squeaks. “What does my sister have to do with anything?”

He gets no answer other than more giggling, and then there’s a small flash and a bang, and Mike jumps as the wall mount splits down the middle and then falls off the wall. The hand set gets smacked out of Mike’s shaking hand, and, like a puppet with its strings cut, his knees give out and he crashes to the floor, strong arms wrapping around him and pulling him against a solid chest. He catches a glance of Will’s hand going up to wipe the blood from under his nose before he has to close his eyes for fear of throwing up.

“Kid?” Hopper’s voice swims in his ears, the man’s big hand grabbing at Mike’s head, trying to shake him out of it. “Mike?”

“Mike...” El’s small, cool hands cup Mike’s cheeks. “Mike, wake up.”

Reaching up to thread their fingers together, Mike mumbles, “m ‘wake. Feel weird.” His stomach lurches.

*Tell her Nancy wants to float with her...*

His eyes snap open so quickly Mike feels bile rise in the back of his throat as the light from the room stabs at his tender retinas. He flails in Hopper’s arms until the man releases his hold, and El takes a hasty step back when Mike manages to climb to his feet, only venturing close when he starts swaying dangerously, listing to one side. Hopper steadies a hand against Mike’s shoulder until Mike shrugs him off and staggers his way towards the door, one hand cupping his ear and the other pressed tightly against his stomach. “I have to go home,” he slurs, throat constricting unnaturally. “I have to-” A few feet from the couch, just off the rug and on the floorboards, Mike doubles over, arms wrapping around his waist as he throws up noisily.

Will, hovering behind Mike anxiously, goes still in horror as water splashes onto the polished wood beneath Mike's feet, brown and rotten as it mats Mike's shirt to his front, and then Will dives forwards to grab at Mike's hips and keep his body upright as he sinks to the ground and more water bubbles over his lips like a brook, as if there's a dam broken open in his lungs. "Mike?"

"What's wrong with him?" Max and Lucas are suddenly crouched on Mike's other side, careful not to get their hands or feet in the steadily growing puddle. "That's... that's water," Max says. "He's throwing up water. How can he be throwing up water?"

Mike is choking in Will's arms, clawing at his own throat as his friends and family gather around him uselessly, unsure whether touching his spasming body would be a help or a hindrance, until El lets out a shriek of frustration and holds her own hands near Mike's mouth. His wet, brown eyes flick up desperately to hers, blood vessels bursting in the whites as the water splatters over his teeth. Will feels the low hum of El's powers in his head, and he watches with baited breath as Mike goes rigid against him, sharp sounds escaping his mouth as El pulls the water out of his chest, a horrifyingly beautiful ball of green water forming between her hands, light dancing on its surface as if there's an invisible sun in the room. When Mike finally sucks in a proper breath of air, El lets the water crash to the floor as she reaches for Mike, wetting knees and the cuffs of everyone's pants as she does.

But something is still wrong. Will can feel Mike's heart thumping erratically under his hand, can see his abdomen twitching, the drenched fabric of Mike's shirt clinging to his skin. "Are you..." Will starts, but Mike flips over onto his hands and knees suddenly, brushing Will aside.

Coughing horribly once, twice, three times, his whole body wracked with them, Mike's shoulders hunch and he retches violently. Arms buckling, the party, Joyce, and Hopper watch in shock as Mike's throat seems to bulge seconds before he claps a hand over his mouth. Something inside his mouth clinks, the sickening sound of stone against teeth, and he spits, more water spraying between his fingers before he coughs wetly one more time. His hand clenches around something and he shudders, flipping his hand over to drop something

small, round, and covered in moss into the small pool of water on the floor with a splash and a plink.

“Oh my god,” Dustin breathes, and Will shakes himself, leaning over to brush his hands over Mike’s back comfortingly.

He combs Mike’s hair back as Mike slowly sits back on his heels, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. “I have to go home,” Mike rasps, determinedly not looking at the mossy *thing* or the stagnant water, staring El down until she helps him stand up again. “I’m sorry. I have to go home, my mom.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Hopper growls at him, face distorted with worry and disgust. “You just threw up a fucking lake puddle, and god knows what else. Stay right there.”

“No,” Mike says stubbornly. “I *have to go home*.” And he takes a defiant, slightly shaky, step towards the door, holding Hopper’s gaze with steely eyes. There’s a moment where something passes between them, before Hopper huffs, crossing his eyes as he jerks his chin towards the door. “I’ll be back later,” Mike promises, his voice strained and croaky. Something is happening to his family, he just knows it. He has to make sure they’re okay.

Will makes to follow Mike as he staggers out onto the veranda, a hand reached out towards the boy, but Hopper stops him with an arm around his waist. Lucas looks to Joyce and Hopper incredulously. “Why are you just letting him go?” he asks over the sound of the motorbike engine roaring to life. “Hello?!” He waves his arms for extra emphasis.

“He’ll be back later,” Hopper repeats Mike’s words gruffly, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Fuck.” He and Joyce swap silent looks. “I’m going to make coffee,” Hopper says eventually, stomping into the kitchen. “Lots of coffee.” Then he starts banging around in the cabinets, trying to find seven mugs and enough milk for all of them.

Joyce stares at the mess on her floor with a perturbed expression. “We should... clean this up.”

While Will, Lucas, and Dustin mop up the water under supervision

from Joyce, and El retreats to the kitchen to aid her father before Hopper smashes something in frustration, Max investigates the thing that Mike had coughed up, trying to force her mind to shut up with the questions (*how the fuck had it got inside him? what was it? what happened on the phone?*) as she uses a pair of tweezers and a hair-dryer to carefully prise the moss away. Well, she thought it was moss. It seems more like tiny, hair-like vines to her as she peels each one away until she is left with a perfectly round, smooth white rock. It sits neatly in the palm of her hand, perfectly weighted and without a single imperfection on its surface in the dim light of the bathroom.

“What the fuck?” she mutters to herself, taking herself back into the lounge room, her fingers curled around the stone. “It’s sad,” she announces, perching on a dining room chair, “that I just watched one of my best friends *throw up a puddle of water* and then *almost choke to death* after being fucking *hypnotised on the phone*, and I can’t even muster myself to be freaked out about it because that’s not even the scariest thing I’ve seen today.”

“It was the scariest thing I saw,” Will whispers, abandoning his mop to sit next to Max at the table, his hands folded neatly in his lap. To accommodate his height, he has to hunch to look at her face, his legs splayed out awkwardly in front of him and his feet nudged up against Max’s. “The scariest thing I’ve ever seen.” He picks at the knee of his pyjama pants. “How do you guys deal with it?”

Max tries to repress her confused frown. “What do you mean?” she asks softly, leaning forwards in her chair. The stone digs into her palm. “You’ve been through so much more than a few unexplainable scares straight out of shitty horror movie.”

Shaking his head, Will’s picking speeds up in earnest. “I didn’t... I haven’t *seen* anything,” he murmurs, almost sounding hesitant in his own voice. “Yes, I saw the Upside Down, and I saw the Mind Flayer, but... at a distance. Like I wasn’t even there. I saw them as an afterthought.” Will ducks his head, and Max has to strain to hear him. “But the Demodogs? The gateway? Mike saw El *disintegrate* right in front of him; Jonathan almost had his *face* ripped off by the Demogorgon; you, Dustin, and Lucas saw what happened in the bus, and Billy attacking Steve. My mom has stared insanity and losing everything in the eye, and Hopper... he’s seen the worst of the world

and still tries to protect us from it.” Fat tears start dripping from Will’s eyes, splashing off his knuckles and turning his grey flannel pants mottled with black spots. “I didn’t see anything that happened to you guys in the lab, Max. I could only hear it and see what happened after. But *that*.” He swallows thickly. “I have these nightmares, right? Were stuff like that happens. But that was *real*. It wasn’t a feeling, or a memory. *Real*.”

“Will,” Max says, reaching out with her free hand to grab onto his.

The boy looks up at her, eyes like river water swimming with tears. “I just watched my boyfriend nearly drown in my arms, in the middle of my living room, and there was nothing I could do about it but feel his heart start to stop under my hands.” He keeps shaking his head. “I have nightmares like this, but...”

Max pushes out of her chair and gathers Will up in a hug. She doesn’t say anything (*how do you even begin to respond to something like that?*) doesn’t have to say anything, just lets Will cling to her until El is there, mug of coffee in either hand and her face soft as she carefully sits in Will’s lap and lets him hold onto her instead, heads tucked in together tightly. Their eyes flicker around under their closed eyelids, lips twitching occasionally. Max imagines they’re having a very intense and involved conversation in their little connected place while their coffees go cold on the dining room table. She takes a sip of her own brew and turns the stone over in her hand, wondering if she should mention it.

“Now,” Hopper sighs, taking his place perpendicular to Joyce where she sits at the head of the small table. “Break out those folders, Dustin. We have a long night of reading ahead of us.”

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Engine barely off, Mike practically kicks down the garage door in an effort to get inside as quickly as possible, stubbornly ignoring the searing pain in his ribs and how hard it is for him to breathe properly, the way his mouth tastes like stale water, and his lips feel like they’re made of broken ice. His Supercomm is held tightly under one arm – the driest place he had to keep it. “MOM?” he yells into the darkened house, trying to run up the stairs and winding himself

on the landing, leaning heavily against the wall as his stomach jumps and his lungs burn. Twice on the way home he had had to pull over and retch up more of that foul water. “NANCY?” The ride from the Byers’ house had been just long enough to send Mike’s mind into overdrive, replaying that strange (*awful*) phone call over and over again in his mind until he’d almost convinced himself that he had made the whole thing up. And then the voice would come back, sharper than before, and he knows that it couldn’t possibly have been his imagination. No way in hell. “ANYONE, PLEASE?”

“MICHAEL WHEELER!” He stops dead at his mother’s furious voice, nearly dropping the Supercomm and his throat catching for a completely different reason. It occurs to him in that moment that it is very late at night, and both his mother and Holly were probably in bed sleeping before he came barging into the house like the world is coming to an end. Karen appears in her bedroom doorway, robe thrown on and her hands on her hips threateningly. “WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” Not quite what Mike was expecting. She marches towards him, still imposing to her eighteen year old son, even now that he’s outgrown her by an inch or two. Mike forgets his pain as he shrinks back against the wall for fear of being clobbered by her protective motherly rage.

“Will’s,” he squeaks out, and she deflates immediately at the hoarseness of his voice, her face softening and eyes quickly cataloguing his appearance in the dark. Soaked, shivering, and red-eyed. “You rang, remember?” he prompts her (*tell me you didn’t, tell me that I imagined the whole thing*) as he edges away from the wall.

Karen nods, crossing her arms. “I rang over an *hour ago*, Michael, because the hospital called me to say you and your friends were being detained by police for suspected criminal activity! But when I got to the hospital to pick you up, *you weren’t there!*” She purses her lips and breathes through her nose for a beat, while Mike struggles to come up with a suitable excuse, before she closes the gap between them and takes his chin gently between her hands. “What on Earth happened, Mike?” she asks him gently, her thumbs brushing just under his eyes as she’s careful not to get her robe wet on his clothing. “Have you been crying? Your eyes are all red.” When he doesn’t answer her, she sighs resignedly. Communication had ceased to be a

regular feature in the Wheeler house.

The relationship between the members of the Wheeler family had been strained to breaking point when Nancy went off to college with Jonathan, only to remain that way when the two came back to Hawkins to live with Steve while he finished his police training. Not wanting to spend more time than necessary away from his friends – his real family – Mike himself was hardly home, barely sleeping in his own bed, and preferring the basement to the rest of the house when he was forced to stay there, leaving Karen to spend her time with Holly when the young girl wasn't at school. Ted Wheeler, who had quickly become an unwanted fixture in his own home without the noise and dramatics of three children to buffer him, had quietly, and politely, removed himself from the house three years ago, existing to them as nothing more than a distant has-been, and a cheque in the mail once a month.

"I suppose there's no use asking what you were doing all day, is there?" Karen gripes as she leads Mike to the bathroom, trying to read anything off his face as she hands him a towel and clean clothes from the hamper. "I'll just assume it's related to whatever left Steven in the hospital."

Mike's façade cracks at the mention of Steve, and he bobs his head jerkily. "Party business," he rasps, holding the towel tightly against his chest. If there's no water, then nothing happened. That earns him a pinched face, Karen's eyes narrowed suspiciously. She doesn't *know* what happened all those years ago, not exactly, but she *suspects*, and she knows enough to understand what he means when he says 'party business'. "Why did you hang up on me?" he asks her instead of elaborating.

"The line went dead," she replies curtly. "Go and change, I'll make you a hot drink."

"I didn't mean to wake you up," Mike whispers to her as she leaves the bathroom. "Something bad happened, and I was worried."

Karen pats his arm as she walks past, a sad little gesture that carries too much loss behind it. "I was worried too, Michael." And her words are like a second punch to the gut.

Supercomm resting on the sink, the mirror is the first thing he sees when Mike peels his saturated shirt off and lets it fall to the ground with a wet splash. He could scream at the sight of himself if his chest didn't feel so scraped raw already, with his skin pale and sallow and his eyes already bruising over the lids. His throat looks grey, like yet another bruise is fighting its way to the surface, and Mike touches the area gingerly, wincing as the slight pressure feels like he's swallowing sand. Tilting his head, Mike's eyes get drawn to his right ear. There's a thin trail of dried blood leading from his ear down his neck, a few wispy curls stuck in the mess. "What the hell..." he whispers, moving his hand from his neck to his ear. It's too much for one day, when there are still flecks of El's dried blood on his hands, and the worry for Steve eating away at the back of his brain. *And the voice on the phone.*

Mike doesn't realise that he has started to sob until his mother is there, earnestly pulling him into her arms and hugging him tightly.

"I never know what's going on with you, Michael," Karen whispers into his hair as she strokes his back softly. "I never know where you are, or what you're doing, or who you're with." She draws in a shuddery breath. "These last few years, after everything that happened with Will, and that girl, I thought you were safe, but now I don't even know that."

Clinging to her robe with his face hidden in her neck, Mike chokes out, "I'm sorry, Mom. I'm so sorry."

Eventually, they make their way into the kitchen, Karen re-boiling the kettle and they sit at the kitchen island in silence with their steaming cups, conversation only transpiring when Mike asks where Holly is, Karen informing him that his youngest sister is at Summer Camp – where she has been for the past three days. Mike, who had been alternating staying at the cabin, and then the Byers' when Hopper decided he couldn't deal with three teens on his own, hadn't even realised that his younger sister had left, and that his mother had been alone in the house the entire time. He wonders if Claudia had visited her at all – he knows that his mother and Dustin's were quite good friends now.

"Michael–" It's the third time Karen has tried to initiate talk beyond

their discussion of Holly. Each time, she had withdrawn into silence and stirred another lump of sugar into her tea. She persists this time – third time lucky, as they say. “Michael, why were you calling for Nancy? You must have known that she was also at the hospital – the nurses were pulling up beds for her and Jonathan when I arrived.” Of course Nancy wouldn’t be in the house she hasn’t lived in for over a year. What the hell had Mike been thinking? He wasn’t thinking, he was scared.

Instead of answering, Mike drains the rest of his cup. “It doesn’t matter anymore. I think I was just being paranoid.”

Silence falls between them again, and it is so awkward, that Mike swears his brain starts making up sounds to distract him – like El repeatedly calling his name. It takes a long, pointed stare from his mother for Mike to realise that El really is calling his name, and he dives for the Supercomm resting on the chair beside him. “El?” he pants, holding it with both hands. “El, what’s wrong?”

“Mike – quiet please.” He can hear all the background noise immediately fade into silence at her soft demand, and he can’t help but smile slightly. “Mike, we read the files.”

“-And we found out that there’s only three of the children they experimented on left alive!” Dustin suddenly blurts out, his voice growing rapidly in volume as Mike assumes he runs over from the other side of the room. El huffs, and there’s some static as the Supercomm on their end changes hands before Dustin takes over completely. “Mike, only *three!*”

Mike blinks. “El, Kali, and..?”

“Twelve!” Dustin exclaims. “He was the youngest of the group – his file was pretty small, apparently he got pulled out by his parents when he was three because there was some kind of incident and two of the other kids died.” His voice goes soft. “El is really upset about it. She can’t remember a lot of it, who the other kids were or what happened to them – we think Brenner did something to her memories – but she really wants to find him.” He clears his throat. “She wants to find Twelve.” And he starts to whisper. “And I think Will does too.”

That doesn't make much sense to Mike, who tells Dustin that much. "Why does Will want to find him?"

"Innate clairvoyance," Will's voice takes over quietly, and Mike can hear Dustin complaining in the distance. "That's what power Twelve has, Mike."

"Seeing the future isn't going to be much help to you, Will," Mike reminds him gently, intimately aware suddenly that his mother is sitting directly across the table from him and doesn't know about anything that Mike's friends are informing him of – *anything*. "What happened to you in the woods was years ago."

He can almost picture Will shaking his head. "That's not all that 'clairvoyance' means, Mike – it means that he knows things beyond normal sensory contact. Like–"

"True Sight," Mike says as the words leave Will's mouth.

"True Sight," Will echoes again. "If we can find him... Mike, he might be able to explain everything that happened to me, what happened to El. What the *fuck* happened in the lab..." He breathes in shakily. "What happened to *you*."

Mike frowns. "Me? Nothing happened to me."

"Don't be dumb, Wheeler," Will scolds him sharply. "Max cleaned up that thing that came up with the water. A rock. A round, white rock. It's quite beautiful actually – Lucas thinks it would be perfect for skipping." A clatter sounds from the other side of the table, and Mike nearly jumps out of his skin at the sound, turning his head to stare at his mother as Karen hastily picks up her teaspoon from where she had dropped it on the table, a strange look of shock on her face. "Mike?" Will asks, and Mike realises that he had missed a question, quickly asking Will to repeat himself. "Mom and Hop have gone back to the cabin to get some of Hopper's files, to see if he has any more information. When are you coming back?"

"Soon," Mike says. He stands from the island, intending to go down into the basement for a short nap now that he knows his mother is fine. "Where is this kid anyway? You know that, at least, right?"

Will hums, the faint sound of rustling paper reaching Mike through the Supercomm. “We know where his family were headed when they left Hawkins. And that’s where we’re getting stuck.”

“What, why?”

“Because it’s not a real place,” Will says bluntly. “We can’t find it on any maps, or in the phone directories. Hopper swears he’s heard the name before – that’s why they’ve gone hunting for files, he thinks there was something about it from Doctor Owens’ notes – but we can’t be sure. El and I have a photo of him, we’re going to try to find him in the *mind place*, see if that leads us anywhere.” He must sense Mike’s mounting annoyance of him skirting around the name of this ‘not real place’ because Will finally says, comment almost flippant in nature, “You haven’t heard of Derry, have you, Mike? You were always better at geography than the rest of us. Derry, Maine?”

*Derry, Maine.*

The Supercomm hits the kitchen tiles and shatters as the ancient, brittle plastic flies off in every direction, mixing in with shards of china from Karen’s teacup as it too falls to the floor from Karen’s limp hand. Mother and son Wheeler stare at each other with near-bulging eyes.

*Derry, Maine.* Mike sees a house, a bed of neatly-trimmed dead and dying sunflowers, and a swing set. *Derry, Maine.* He walks up the garden path from the freshly painted gate, familiar and alien at the same time. *Derry, Maine.* The front door opens smoothly before his fingers have even brushed the wooden surface, and Mike finds himself in a living room he thought he had seen in the drawings of a picture book he forgot long ago–

*–Nancy’s knucklebones are mixed in with Mike’s marbles on the loungeroom floor, and the little boy is on his hands and knees trying to quickly pick them out before Peter Gordon shows up to ride with Mike to the Jackson Street intersection. They like playing there because the batty old bird who lives in the house on the corner brings them lemonade and homemade dots to lick off the baking sheets as they flick their marbles around. Mike glances furtively out the window – he hopes the rain keeps her horrid cat inside.*

*After several tense minutes where he almost throws his favourite tombowler over his shoulder instead of the last knucklebone, he scoops all the marbles into his pockets and grabs his backpack, ready to head out into the frigid December air. It doesn't snow in Derry, but the wind likes to think it does, temperatures plummeting without notice and causing little boys to get their fingers frostbitten on the handlebars of their bikes. He's halfway to the front door when his mother's voice stops him in his tracks.*

*"Where are you going, Michael?" she asks curiously, emerging from the kitchen with oven mitts on and flour on her face. Upstairs, Mike can hear the faint strains of that stupid Scottish band Nancy has completely fallen in love with, her record player almost run into the ground form the amount of times she's played her new 45. Karen shoots Mike a reprimanding look. "Your aunt and uncle are bringing Richard over this afternoon, in case you had forgotten."*

*Mike groans at the thought of being stuck 'watching' his baby cousin, who can barely do anything at six months old, but tries to conceal it for fear of not being allowed to taste whatever Karen is working on in the baking department – he hopes it's apple pie. "Nowhere. Me and Peter are going to play marbles."*

*His mother mirrors his earlier action as she looks out the window, face turning slightly pinched when she sees the rain, heavier now than even a few minutes ago. "Alright, but be home before six, I don't want you missing dinner!"*

*"Yes, mom!" Mike groans, head turning when he hears a bike bell being trilled at him from outside. "I'm going now."*

*Karen watches him struggle with the door handle with a small smile on her face, before saying, "You be careful playing by the storm drains, Michael. There's one on the corner of Jackson Street and Witcham." She raises her mitted-hands in defence as he starts whining plaintively at her. "I know you and the boys from school like to play marbles over there." He sighs and nods, and she continues, "I don't want to hear any stories about anyone falling inside trying to catch a stray one, do you understand?"*

*"Yes, mom!" Mike says, again, finally succeeding in getting the door open. "I'm not stupid enough to reach into the sewers after a toy!"*

*Waving him off with a fond shake of her head, Karen says goodbye. “And don’t be late for dinner – you know Uncle Wentworth has no time for being kept waiting!”*

–Mike gasps, pitching forwards and barely managing to catch himself on the island. His head shoots up, and he locks eyes with his mother. “Did you-?” he starts, but Karen is already pivoting on her foot, breaking into a sprint as she disappears from the kitchen. “Mom?!” He starts after her on unsteady legs, mind reeling, and stomach burning so badly, Mike is terrified that he’s about to throw up another rock (*how did he throw up one in the first place? where did it come from? what did it mean?*) as he pounds up the stairs after the sounds of his mother yanking down the ladder into the attic. “Mom, what are you doing?!”

“I forgot, Michael!” she wails back, already half up the ladder as he reaches the top of the last landing. “I forgot my home, and my friends, and my family!”

“Mom!” Mike calls again, not knowing what else to say. He had forgotten too – their beautiful house, the blue river in the Quarry, a time when his parents had smiled at each other. His legs shake as he awkwardly climbs the ladder after his mother, finding her hunched over a dusty box, elbows-deep in the unknown depths. “What are you looking for?”

Karen shakes her head. “I don’t know, I don’t know!” She yanks her hands out, a shoebox clutched so tightly between them the frail old cardboard is buckling, the lid popping off one corner. “How do you forget twenty five years of your life?!” Making to stand, the lid gives up, and the box spills its guts onto the floor, photos and postcards and notes tumbling across the floor in a cloud of dust and so many memories it makes them both dizzy. Reacting blindly, Karen snatches up the first paper within reach, pouring over the names and numbers when she recognises the letterhead from an old personal planner given to her by... by... “Maggie! My sister-in-law Maggie gave me this for my birthday in 1975.” The paper is yellowed and folded so sharply the corner comes off completely as she smooths it out. “We were planning a get together, a baby shower for Jessica Hanlon.” Her voice is so soft as she touches the pencil markings, her eyes holding emotions Mike can’t even describe.

He reaches down and picks up a card that had made its way all the way onto the top of his foot. ‘Doctor Wentworth Tozier,’ it reads in faded blue ink. ‘Derry Dental and Oral Health’. A cartoon turtle dances beside the name, a bright pink toothbrush in its little flipper, the other pointing to a phone number. When Mike flips it over, he finds a second phone number, hand-written this time, and a scrawled home address. He doesn’t know what possesses him to do it, but he shoves the card into the pocket on his shirt. Something flashes in his head, grade school lessons with cartoon maps and an American street directory. “I have to go,” he says without thinking. Karen looks up, startled, from the family photo she is inspecting in the dusty light. “I have to – I can find Derry!” He can see it so clearly in his mind’s eye, a map of Maine with the town of Derry clearly marked with a dot marker and size four type. “I can find Derry, which means we can find Twelve!”

How Mike finds his way back down to the garage, he’ll never know. But with his uncle’s business card in his pocket, his head a mess with years of forgotten life, and his mother screaming his name in the distance, he kicks his bike back to life and shoots off back towards the Byers’ house – it was time they got to the bottom of this.

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*The loud trill of the kitchen phone doesn’t reach the bedrooms upstairs, but he hears it loud and clear in his room behind the bathroom, pulling himself out of bed quietly to answer it when it doesn’t stop. “Hanlon Farm,” Mike says around a yawn, trying to stifle it in the crook of his elbow. He’s still rattled from whatever... that was, the thing that happened in the alleyway on his rounds that morning, the thing he doesn’t ever want to think about because it can’t have been real. It can’t. “Mike speaking.” Mike is amazed at how level his voice is.*

“Mike?” the woman’s voice on the other end of the line breathes. “This is, uh. Is Will there? Will Hanlon?”

*Mike feels that familiar stutter in his chest, that tightness at the back of his throat, behind his teeth. “No,” he croaks. He can’t work out who this woman is – how could someone who lives in Derry not know about William and Jessica Hanlon, and their house on Harris Avenue? – and why she wants to talk to his father. “He’s. He’s dead. This is his son,*

*Mike.”*

*The silence that follows makes Mike’s skin crawl, until a breathy, please-tell-me-that-isn’t-true whisper reaches him. “What? How – how long ago?”*

*“January,” Mike says blankly, staring at the phone cord, the white plastic almost glowing in the dark. Who is this woman, and why has she rung for his father in the middle of the night? “I’m sorry...” What do you say to a stranger on the phone. “Did you know my dad?”*

*“Once,” the woman replies shakily. Mike realises that she has started to cry, and sadness sweeps over him, different to the grief he has been carrying for his family. She sounds... kind. Motherly. “A long time ago. We were friends.”*

*Mike’s eyebrows raise slightly. He had grown up knowing every one of his father’s friends, except... the one woman who left Derry, before Mike was even born.*

*“I’m sorry, I have to go,” the woman says suddenly. “I shouldn’t have rung you so late.” Her voice is thick now, choked up. “Goodbye, Michael. Goodnight.”*

*“Goodnight, Kar-” Mike is cut off by the line going dead. “Karen,” he whispers, eyes flicking to the photo of his father that hangs above the refrigerator, of his parents’ wedding day. William, Jessica, and their shared maid of honour: Karen Tozier.*

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*“Absolutely not,” is the first thing Joyce says when they’ve finished explaining their very vague and not at all well-thought-out plan. “No way in hell.” She shakes her head, cigarette between her lips. “This is not becoming a second Chicago trip!” Ah, yes. Chicago. That time they accidentally discovered that El had a sister of sorts – Kali, of course – and Mike and Will ditched school for four days riding down to Illinois with El to find the older girl. It had been an educational experience, to say the least.*

*“This is nothing like Chicago!” Will protests in vain, his arms still wrapped securely around Mike, where they had been set like stone*

since Mike had reappeared in the house an hour ago, storming inside with wild eyes, wild words, and a wild plan to solve all their problems. The party didn't even understand half of what had come out of Mike's mouth – Will is certain that Mike himself didn't understand much of what he was saying – but they quickly picked up on the fact that *he knew where to find Derry!* “This is *important!*”

Mild annoyance flashes across El's face where she is clinging to Mike's other side at the implication that finding her ‘family’ wasn’t important, and Will hastily apologises, brushing a hand over the side of her neck. “Show them,” she tells Mike, the map of Maine clutched in her hand. “*Show them.*”

Mike takes the map and holds it out to Hopper and Joyce. “Look,” he whispers, and puts his finger on the paper. He doesn’t even have to look at it, he just *knows* he’s touching the right place, like finding Derry is as easy as riding a bike. “There it is.” The adults squint at the map, and sure enough, right under the pad of Mike’s finger, a little inscription that reads ‘Derry’ has appeared that definitely was not there the first twenty times Hopper pored over the map with a magnifying glass. “I know how to get there!”

“No one is going *anywhere* until we have discussed this properly!” Hopper decrees over the din that starts up, Dustin instantly campaigning for a road trip with back up from Lucas and Max. “No one, anywhere.” He points at each of the six party members in turn. “We are all tired, emotional, and all of you need to go to bed before someone passes out.” He sucks in a deep breath, Joyce’s free hand settling on his bicep seeming to calm him down immensely before he makes his next statement. “Today has been shitty situation after shitty situation, and I, for one would like to forget any of it ever happened.” And then he turns on his heel and marches towards Joyce’s bedroom.

Wagging her cigarette at her son when Will starts smirking despite himself, mouthing ‘not a word’, Joyce follows after Hopper. “Bed!” she calls over her shoulder. “I don’t want to see or hear any of you until breakfast time!”

According to Will’s bedside clock, the party settles down on the floor of his room at two thirty in the morning, his mattress dragged down

onto the floor with a pile of couch cushions and every pillow and blanket not already claimed by Hopper. Mike, Will, and El squash together as tightly as possible, a rather uncomfortable looking knot of arms, legs, and tangled blankets, while Dustin lays claim to the abandoned mattress, his feet thrown over one side where they bump gently against Max and Lucas' shoulders. No one talks, a silent agreement erupting between them all to do as told, for once. They sleep.

According to Will's beside clock, he sits up at four thirty-eight, Mike cradled against his side and El wrapped around Mike's back like a koala. "Guys," he hisses, shaking Mike gently and shooting a tiny *zing* at El to wake her up. "Guys." He waits for Dustin's snorting and flailing to stir Max and Lucas before whispering, "I can't sleep when the answers are so close."

"Neither can I..." Mike says, head resting heavily on Will's shoulder. "I need to know what I forgot."

Max flips over onto her side so she can squint at the trio in the dark. "So, let's go." She sits up, pulling on Lucas' arms to get him upright too. Dustin drapes himself over their shoulders with a sleepy groan. "I'm serious. We all have a bit of money, we have a car and the motorbike – Mike knows where we're going." Up on her knees she goes, dislodging the boys as she starts to gesture to illustrate her point. "It won't take us long at all! A day to get there, a few to investigate, a day to get back – we'll be less than a week, and they can't be mad at us if we get to the bottom of everything."

"You say that," El croaks, her voice thick and sleepy. "You know they will." She grins, impish in the dimly lit room. "We go to Derry."

"We go to Derry!" Dustin exclaims, fists raised in triumph before he's shushed by his friends. "We go to Derry!" he whispers, face bright with excitement.

In the early hours of the morning, Hopper and Joyce are awoken from a fitful sleep by the sound of Mike's motorbike roaring to life, closely followed by the engine of Max's car starting up. Joyce flies out of bed, nearly kicking Hopper over the other side of the mattress as she runs into the hallway. "WILL?" her voice echoes around the

house, Hopper following her at a much slower pace. He already knows – he knew before he had even gone to bed – and now all he can do is watch resignedly as the bike and car disappear down the drive as the first rays of sunlight start to peek over the horizon. Turning away from Joyce clawing at the door to her car (*the keys are still in the kitchen*) ready to chase after them, Hopper spots a pile of folded up blankets on the couch, a piece of paper resting on top.

Will's elegant hand reads: ‘We had to go. We're sorry. Ring this number if you need to reach us.’ A phone number is scrawled underneath, an arrow pointing to it labelled ‘Mike's uncle’.  
“Damned kids,” he mutters, taking the note and attaching it to the fridge so it doesn't get lost.

“They're gone,” Joyce whispers, walking back into the house like she's walking to her own grave.

“They are,” Hopper agrees, lighter in one hand as he offers her the cigarette box.

Joyce takes one. “Are we going after them?” She plops into a chair, pressing her hands to her forehead as smoke dribbles out of her mouth.

“Nope.” Hopper nudges the map across the table towards her. “Town name disappeared again.”

“Fuck.”

Hopper takes a seat beside her and prises her hands away from her face, holding one gently in his own. “Fuck, indeed.” They smoke quietly until the butts are left smouldering in the ashtray. “We'd better keep going through that box,” he tells her absently. “If our idiot kids are heading into danger, we should probably work out what it is.”

Dropping a kiss to his cheek as she lights a second cigarette, Joyce says, “You start at one end and we'll meet in the middle?”

“That's how we've always done it.”

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

I hate this chapter, just saying. The next chapter, 'Interlude: Karen Tozier Who?' will be up on or around January 31st, and will be a break from the main storyline for a bit of backstory. Thank you so much to everyone who is sticking with my bullshit! Don't be afraid to come scream at me [on tumblr](#) if you don't have an AO3 account.

## 5. Interlude: Karen Tozier, Who?

### Summary for the Chapter:

As Karen ogles the severed hand in abject horror, two glowing lights peer up at her from the bottom of the river, golden and alive, unblinking eyes watching her, hunting her. That's when Karen faints, slumping sideways on the rock, her mouth still open in a scream that echoes for miles.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Oh, hey! I'm back, an entire week late, with a not-chapter back story thing. Oops. Some notes on this chapter: this is the first chapter I ever wrote for this story, so please bear with some writing style differences, and possibly some minor continuity issues because, frankly, I was too scared to read over it incase I ended up re-writing the whole damned chapter. ALSO please read it, don't just skip it, I'm really proud of this one and there's some important scenes that are relevant all the way through the story...

### Interlude: Karen Tozier, Who?

*This chapter starts in Derry, Maine, in the summer of 1961. That may seem strange, as 1961 was many, many years before the important and already described events in previous chapters surrounding a certain lab, and a certain once-missing boy in a certain state very far away from Maine, and even more years before the incident that will bring our story crashing back into Derry in future chapters. But it is, nevertheless, an important place to start. To understand the intricacies of what is come, you must know of how they came to be. And so, this chapter starts in Derry, Maine, in the summer of 1961.*

– June, to be exact – on a slightly over-cast Monday during the first week of the holidays.

At thirteen years old, Karen Tozier is already more adventurous than her older brother Wentworth could ever hope to be, even with his five-year head start, and she takes her pleasure in running circles around him in practically every aspect of their simple town life, while he seems perfectly happy to follow along two steps behind and a little to the left, cleaning up the mess and destruction left in her wake. They have the same black curls, Karen's tumbling down her back in wild tangles as she dances around their backyard, waiting for Nancy to arrive. Wentworth's, on the other hand, lay sensibly across his forehead and curl around the arms of his glasses as he pushes them further up his nose to keep an eye on Hurricane Karen.

The little girl and her best friend are going to skip rocks in the Quarry, finally allowed out without some form of supervision. As the early June sun beats down on Karen's twirling head, she can't help but let out a little shriek of joy – she and Nancy are going on an adventure! – at the thought of not having her mother breathing down her neck for dirtying her stockings, and her father not yelling at her for interrupting Wentworth's studies. Her big brother is planning on going to school to become a *Dentist*, and the word is always emphasised in her head, as her parents insist that that is a future of great importance.

Karen doesn't know much about becoming a *Dentist*, or much about the future really, as long as it includes skipping rocks with Nancy. Thoughts straying to her still absent friend, Karen halts her dance around the clothesline and turns to stare at their white picket fence, as if the sheer force of her impatient gaze will cause Nancy to make an appearance. The summer air carries the scent of popcorn and peanuts, Karen's stomach rumbling slightly as she turns her small nose to the breeze. Nancy is late.

Huffing, Karen sits down in the grass, the morning still new enough that the sun hasn't devoured the dew drops clinging to the blades. Legs crossed despite promising Mother she would try her very hardest to keep her pleats as neatly ironed as they were when they were fresh off the board that morning, Karen idly picks at the night-heavy daisies. Wool does crease so easily. She can see Wentworth inside the house, his chair pulled up to the window box as he studies one of his mountainous school books and watches her cautiously at the same

time.

For some reason, Wentworth is more worried about Karen's excursion alone with Nancy than their parents.

Along the fence line, Karen suddenly sees two balloons bobbing along merrily, white strings intertwined as the sun reflects off the pretty blue and red plastic, casting beautiful purple shadows over the white pickets. Softly, a little singing voice reaches her ears, and Karen's mood picks up as Nancy pushes the gate open, the balloon strings held tightly in her small hand. Nancy grins as Karen joins in her song, the two girls scrambling across the Tozier's lawn to throw their arms around the other.

Shyly, Nancy offers Karen the blue balloon when they part. "Are you ready to go, Ren?" she asks breathlessly, a little winded from skipping the entire six blocks separating their houses from each other. Nancy shakes her skirt, the little pocket at her left hip sagging and loosing small marbled noises. "I found the most perfect skipping rocks on my way over!"

"Let me see!" Karen demands excitedly, already tying her shiny new balloon around her wrist as she leans in close to her friend to awe over the smooth white stones Nancy pulls from her skirt pocket. Karen takes one when offered, turning the dollar-sized rock over in her nimble, girlish fingers, its surface cold and flawless against her skin. "These are amazing, Nance," she says brightly, already picturing the way the stones will look on the clear green waters of the Quarry. "I bet they'll go for miles – wherever did you find them?"

Karen has never seen a stone so perfect in Derry, before.

Before either girl can say another word, Mrs Tozier appears on the veranda in all her floral aproned glory, brandishing her rolling pin and narrow-eyed suspicious expression. She almost looks unnerved at the sight of the two balloons dancing above the girls' heads. "Nancy Bottledown," she says, voice sharp. "Where did those balloons come from? Have you been accepting things from strangers? -your ma will have a fit when she finds out."

"No, Mrs Tozier," Nancy bleats obediently. Karen spies her friend's

fingers crossed cheekily behind her back, and she bites down on a giggle threatening to bubble out of her mouth. “My cousin Archie got it for me,” she explains, words flowing easily off her silver tongue. Nancy did always have a gift for storytelling. “And I told him that blue was Ren’s favourite colour, so he got her one too.”

Appeased, Mrs Tozier returns to her pie crust like she had never been bothered in the first place, balloons already driven from her mind by thoughts of flour and cracks in her overly-dry dough. Karen’s giggles finally break loose and she leans her shoulder to Nancy’s with a wicked smile curving on her childish face. “What a lark,” she murmurs quietly, her unoccupied hand reaching down for Nancy’s, their balloons bumping together gently above them. “Where’d you really get them? We both know Archie is terrified of burstin’ balloons and won’t go anywhere near them if he can help it.”

The balloons create a purple splash across Nancy’s freckled nose, shifting sometimes from red to blue as Nancy curls her fingers around Karen’s and starts dragging her to the gate. “That’s the thing,” she murmurs, just as quiet. They would both be devastated if Mrs Tozier changed her mind and decided to send boring future *Dentist* Wentworth to the Quarry with them. “No one gave them to me – they was tied to the letterbox when I left the house this morning.” She shrugs her thin shoulders, keeping her fingers hooked with Karen’s as they start off on their adventure. “There wasn’t a note, so I thought I’d take them.”

Karen looks up as they walk, smiling as she watches the balloons trail behind them like giant round birds, fatly bobbing along in the faint breeze. That popcorn smell is back, and Karen hopes Nancy has snacks in her back pack. It’s a long walk to the Quarry when you’re two twelve year old girls whose parents won’t allow bikes – Nancy almost wishes she had thought to sneak Wentworth’s out of the garage, but Mother definitely would have noticed that.

“Strange thing is,” Nancy says, voice airy, after a few minutes of comfortably silent walking, only their flatties slapping the ground and the stones rolling in Nancy’s pocket making sound, “I coulda sworn they were both red when I grabbed them off the box.”

As the girls round the corner that officially marks the end of the

Tozier's cul-de-sac and the start of the track to the Quarry, Karen swears she can hear a faint, manic giggle riding the back of the wind. When she turns her head slightly to look over her shoulder, however, all she sees are houses and trees, and the two balloons floating over their heads.

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"Do you want half my sandwich?" Nancy asks, holding out a squished lump of white bread, margarine, and chunky plum preserve that looks like jelly and smells a little like Karen's mother's foot cream. The two girls are perched on a flat rock sticking out over the water, the heels of their hands resting in the grass behind them as they dangle their bare feet over the edge, toes just brushing the surface of the water. Nancy sees Karen's wrinkled-nose expression and laughs, the sound dancing bell-like off their peaceful surroundings. "Not very appetising, I know."

Karen, who can still faintly smell popcorn, takes the offered food even as Nancy is making to wrap it back in its crumpled paper packaging, ready to stuff it back in the bottom corner of her back pack. "But only because I'm hungry," Karen insists, grinning. She takes a bite of the sandwich, deciding mid-chew that it actually doesn't taste as bad as it looks. "Can you smell that popcorn?" she asks after a few mouthfuls.

"Pretzels," Nancy says, tone corrective, reaching into her pocket to pull out the white stones. She has eight in all, each nearly identical to the next, almost perfectly round and looking rather out of place on the ragged slate-grey rock their make-shift picnic is taking place on. "I can smell pretzels."

Their balloons are still floating overhead, strings tied loosely around the girls' wrists where their pinkie fingers are looped together in the grass. Every now and then, a small squeak emits as they bump against each other, casting red and blue halos over the girls in the midday sun. Karen's curls are tossed casually over her shoulders, and Nancy has pulled her pale hair out of its braid to let the breeze tousle it gently. Talking and giggling quietly, they finish the sandwich and Nancy pulls out a packet of crackers and a small piece of creamed cheese wrapped in wax paper that they quickly devour.

"Let's try these out!" Nancy exclaims, brushing crumbs off the pale blue material of her blouse and climbing to her feet, turning back with a smile to help Karen up. The sun glints off her hair, turning the gold almost white as her red balloon seems to float higher up into the sky behind her. She leans down on dainty legs to pick up the first stone, turning it over once in her fingers before throwing it masterfully at the water. Both girls let out whoops and cheers at it bounces four times before sinking into the green depths, perfect circular ripples lapping at the rock. "Wow!" Nancy breathes, eyes bright. She grabs the next one and presses it into Karen's hands. "You go next!"

Karen's stone skips five times before it, too, is claimed by the water. She laughs delightedly, and nudges another stone closer to Nancy with her toes. They skip their rocks one at a time, marvelling at how far they travel and how smoothly they rebound off the water. Eventually, Karen wraps her fingers around the last of the eight stones, her smile only widening as she hands it to Nancy. "You found them," she says when Nancy tries to push it back into her hand. "You should skip the last one. Never know when we're gonna get our hands on more of these, unless you feel like going swimming?"

Laughing at the comment – both girls know that if Nancy Bottledown had her way, she'd never set foot in more than an inch of water ever again, the bold girl afraid only of water after a particularly horrible near-drowning experience at the beach while on holiday as a very young child – Nancy gratefully takes the stone from her friend, pressing a kiss to Karen's cheek in thanks. "Let's go for seven skips!" she declares, closing one eye as if that will help her stone skip better.

"Go Nancy!" Karen cheers her on, her hands raised into the air in tiny fists waving madly.

Karen wishes she could save this moment, keep it in her memory forever and a day no matter how far away from Derry she ends up. Nancy, her plaid skirt blowing around her knees and her golden hair whirling around her determined, concentrating face. She looks like an avenging angel about to take her vengeance on the water that once tried to take her life, the white stone in her hand her heavenly lance poised to strike the deadly blow. High above her head, her red balloon arches in the sky, a pop of brightness and clarity against the

flat blue as its shadow turns Nancy's hair pink as she whips her arm forwards, her toes curled over the edge of the rock.

Holding their breath as they watch the rock skip once, twice, three times, feels like an eternity, Karen's hand reaching out in slow motion to graze her fingertips over Nancy's wrist. They're so enraptured by the ripples and the water and the rock making its sixth skip as they pray for a seventh that Karen doesn't notice Nancy's foot start to slip. She doesn't notice the way Nancy's face goes slack in shock so suddenly it's like a mask sliding off her skin.

One minute, Nancy is standing beside Karen on the rock, and then... she is gone.

Breath leaving her in a solid-feeling *whump*, and smile frozen on her face in the grotesque shadow of the joy she had felt not two seconds ago, Karen stares at the empty rock where Nancy had stood, almost forcing her eyes to move to the settling splash in the water. The sticky sweet smell of cotton candy clogs her nose, salty popcorn and roasting chestnuts, and Karen can hear laughing, thin and reedy and sort of bubbly, as if emitted from the river itself. A high scream that vaguely resembles Nancy's name pushes past Karen's teeth and her suddenly thick tongue, and she drops to her knees, the rock slicing her skin easily as she scrambles for the edge to squint into the water.

Something dark clouds in the eerily still, green depths, like ink or smoke. A large bubble rises to the surface, Nancy's red balloon erupting from the water. It rises up and up and up and Karen hopelessly follows the string, hoping that Nancy is still attached to the other end when it stops its ascent towards the heavens. Nancy's fingers break through the water and the balloon stills, frozen in the air as the rest of her freckled hand appears in the water. Just her hand. Blood billows from Nancy's wrist, the string of the balloon still tied around it, the white of her bone boring into Karen's soul as her own fingers clench the rocks so tight her nails start to split.

As Karen ogles the severed hand in abject horror, two glowing lights peer up at her from the bottom of the river, golden and alive, unblinking eyes watching her, *hunting* her. That's when Karen faints, slumping sideways on the rock, her mouth still open in a scream that echoes for miles.

*MISSING Nancy Bottledown, 12 Last seen on the Mark Street Cul-De-Sac, wearing a plaid skirt, a pale blue blouse, and flat white shoes, with a red balloon tied to her wrist*

When eight o'clock came and went on that day in June, 1961, and neither Nancy nor Karen Tozier returned home from their journey to the quarry, Mr Tozier, Mr Bottledown, and a near-frantic Wentworth Tozier head out looking for the girls. Wentworth finds his sister crumpled on a rock outcropping by the disturbingly still water of the river, unconscious, frozen, and all alone. A deflated balloon flaps listlessly over her sallow cheeks, a sickly blue-grey colour in the evening light, and beside her is a neat pile of eight white stones, perfectly round and bone dry.

Karen Tozier wakes up screaming, her hazel eyes bloodshot and bulging as she sits bolt upright, back ramrod straight as she seems to stare into the distance at something only she could see. "Nancy!" her voice cracks, and suddenly she's reaching out blindly, fingers curled into shaking claws. "Nancy, where are you?!" It takes hours to calm her down, both her parents and her brother crowded around her as a nurse and a policeman try to talk to her at the same time. No one has seen Nancy since she and Karen left the Tozier's yard. "She's in the river!" Karen insists all night, even when she's exhausted and laid out in her bed. "I swear! She's floating in the river!"

The next day, the police scour the river in the quarry. The only sign they find that proves Nancy Bottledown had even been in the quarry – because the word of an hysterical twelve year old girl is never enough to convince anyone of anything, no matter how dire the circumstances, until it's already too late to do anything about it – is a pair of scuffed white flat-heeled shoes, a pair of plain cotton socks tucked inside them. A volunteer finds the shoes at the top of the grassy slope that leads into the quarry, tucked in a hollow of the exposed roots of a tall tree, a second pair of brown sandals next to them, 'K Tozier' written on a band-aid stuck to the inside heel of one.

Mrs Bottledown confirms that they might be Nancy's white shoes, but

she isn't too sure. The nurse who had handled Karen the night before says that Mrs Bottledown is experiencing some form of shock-related trauma, and is having problems remembering much about her daughter.

"Karen," a policeman says gently that evening, sitting in a high-backed chair beside the prostrate form of Karen, huddled under a pile of blankets despite the heat, shivering. "Are you sure Nancy was at the quarry with you?" He carefully shakes Karen's shoulder to make sure the girl is listening to him. "Karen?" Karen remains unresponsive, whimpering softly under her blankets. "Karen, can you hear me? We need to know where Nancy went last night, Karen. No one is going to be mad at you for lying about the quarry."

"M not lying..." Karen whispers, voice like the wind through the grass on a dry evening. Her thin fingers, nails bitten down to the quick, appear over the edge of the quilt, dragging the patchwork material down enough to show tangled curls and wide, hazel eyes, glassy and bloodshot. "She was at the quarry," Karen says as firmly as she can while looking and sounding like a half-drowned kitten. "We were skipping rocks in the river. She was standing at the edge. Something..." her voice, already hushed as if telling a great secret, drops to nigh inaudible, "...*something pulled her in.*"

The policeman sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose and wishing however selfishly that he had decided to stay with the search party while someone else dealt with this clearly traumatised girl. "We found your rocks yesterday, Karen," he reminds her. "They were completely dry, you hadn't skipped them yet." Slowly, he reaches out to take one of her hands, hoping the action will ground her enough to realise the seriousness of the situation. "You have to tell us where Nancy is, Karen."

"The water!" Karen explodes, shooting up in bed and practically head-butting the policeman, her quilt clutched in her hands like a lifeline, the only thing grounding her in reality. "The water, she was in the water! Floating! I saw her, she was there!" Karen chokes on her words, the golden eyes flashing through her mind, the laugh, the smell in the air, the red balloon... The following scream she lets out is so loud that, later, she will be surprised she didn't shatter every window in the Tozier house, didn't crack the mirrors or chip the

mugs, didn't cause irreparable hearing damage to everyone close enough to feel her pain in their eardrums.

When she finally falls silent, her voice petering out in a sharp crack and a husky gasp, Karen's mouth falls shut with a click, and stubbornly refuses to open again, no matter how many questions the police, her parents, and Nancy's family fire at her. If they won't believe what she has to say, why should she anything at all?

Four more children go missing that summer. Talitha Mason disappears on her way back to her house from the bakery one morning, last seen walking over the Kissing Bridge with a loaf of bread tucked under her arm – they find the loaf of bread under the bridge weeks later, half eaten by rats and speckled with what could be mould, could be dried blood. At the end of August, little Sammy Baker doesn't come home after going to play in the Barrens, and Will Hanlon swears until he's blue that he saw Sammy playing marbles at the mouth of the large sewer pipe that leaks crap into the Kenduskaeg, but the police don't find anything there.

Between September 1961, and July 1962, another some twenty kids up and disappear from the town. Some turn up – dead of course, bitten and bruised and bleeding – and some more turn up in pieces, an arm here, half a leg there... Alvin Marsh finds three fingers and a big toe in a storm drain in June while reaching in after a lost yo-yo, running away screaming when he pulls his hand out bloody and slimy. A week later, Bobby Newby is poking around the Standpipe looking for quarters and trips over what's left of Talitha Mason under a cluster of bushes, and later that same day, old Mrs Wagner from up on Neibolt Street is trimming the edge of the lawn adjacent to the empty lot with the old well at its centre, when she stumbles across a small foot ripped off the leg at the ankle, a large bite mark on the heel. She promptly has a heart attack, and later dies in the Derry Medical Centre.

Most of the children are neither seen nor heard from again. Nancy Bottledown is never found.

Throughout it all, Karen Tozier remains silent, her face withdrawn and her eyes sad as she wakes up on any given week to learn that yet another person she goes to school with, another child she sees

playing in the street, another kid she knows from church, has vanished. She does not speak, not to answer her mother's worried questions, not to tell her father that he's hurting her when he drags her somewhere a little too roughly, not to snap at Wentworth when he's being so overbearing she thinks she could scream if her mouth hadn't stayed stubbornly shut since Nancy's disappearance (*murder, she reminds herself, Nancy was murdered, dragged into the river by – by – it. Whatever it is.*)

But, time marches on, as time is want to do, and the posters of the missing children are abandoned one by one, each name and face forgotten for the sake of moving forward. Eventually, when months had passed and the town numbers shakily stayed the same, and even Mrs Bottledown had begun to forget her own daughter's face, Karen opens her mouth and utters one single word: "Bullshit."

Whether she meant the town forgetting its children was bullshit, or the fact that they had gone missing in the first place was bullshit, even she didn't know.

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The Derry Town House puts up a 'HELP WANTED' sign in 1965, and Karen Tozier has a job behind the reception desk by the time she turns seventeen two weeks later. She's sick of her parents constantly hovering over her, having never quite gotten over her thirteen months of silence, and she's sick of her brother, who doesn't even live in their house anymore, but in a share house in Bangor with some other medical students as he struggles ever closer towards his *Dentist* dream, because he calls her every damn day to make sure she's okay. Most of all, however, she's sick of their house. Their beautiful two-story, surrounded by the always-neat lawn and the freshly re-painted white picket fence, exactly the same as every other house in the cul-de-sac.

She might have forgotten the details of her friend's death over the years, beyond the fact that she *knows* Nancy drowned in the quarry, but their house, her room, the gate that still reminds Karen of her best friend, dead now for almost four years, unchanged inside since that day in 1961 except for one child moving out and the other slowly making her way into adulthood.

She needs independence, rebellion, something that is *hers* and hers alone. So, Karen stands behind the tiny reception desk for eight hours on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, and an extra four hours every second Sunday, earning herself a dollar (*and twenty-five cents*) every hour – and twice that on public holidays. Meticulously, she puts every penny she makes into an old bean tin she lifted from the trash, cleaning it, peeling it, and painting it blue all over to sit on her nightstand, a push-pin carefully piercing one side to hold a piece of paper to it, proclaiming it as ‘Karen’s Get Out of Derry Fund’. She doesn’t know exactly how much she’ll need to leave the town, she just knows that she is going to leave, some day.

It turns out that Karen Tozier *excels* at customer service. Her year of silence appeared to have provided her with some sort of divine knowledge and insight into the bizarre world of human behaviour, and she can turn even the most stubborn and childish of guests into the placid, well-mannered adults their identification says they’re supposed to be. By the time Christmas rolls around, they’re promoting her to full-time employment, and she’s the youngest front of house manager the Town House has ever seen when she’s just three months shy of turning eighteen. She’s running a staff of twelve, including a certain Margaret ‘Call-Me-Maggie’ Elwick, who takes an instant and unexplainable shine to Wentworth the one and only time he decides to visit Karen at work – which turns out to be more an excuse to put a pile of his business cards on her front desk than anything else.

The tin on Karen’s nightstand has become forty-eight tins in her closet, fifteen more in her desk draw, and three giant coffee tins on the floor next to her bed. Karen doesn’t dare count any of it, not one single coin, not yet. Not until she knows just where she’s going or what she wants to do. And that is what she is thinking about on that fateful day in 1966 when she meets her ticket out of Derry. Half the people she knew in middle school have gone – Bobby Newby’s parents moved halfway across the country after he found that dead body (*a cat? a dog? Karen can’t remember*) if the rumours are to be believed – and Karen can’t wait for her turn to get the hell out.

Theodore Wheeler is a low-ranking accountant for a big-name, national bank that Karen has never heard of, because Derry is so

backwards it still has three separately owned (*and constantly warring*) family banks. He has been sent to Derry on some sort of reconnaissance mission, to see if any of said family banks would hand over their businesses to whatever branch Mr Wheeler represents. Karen isn't exactly listening to him ramble on in his slow, monotonous voice as he checks in. She's listening to the taxi company's phone number scrawled on the back of his hand, to the photo she spies in his wallet of a woodsy town very different from Derry, to the brand-new watch and the patent leather briefcase in his hand.

"So, Ted," she says conversationally, cutting him off mid-sentence about *something* numerical and beyond Karen's interests. He reminds her a little of Wentworth, *Dentist Wentworth Tozier*, who went away and came back and spends his days poking people's teeth and boring them all with lectures about gum disease and toothbrush hygiene. Karen smiles serenely and pops her gum as Ted Wheeler – newly christened in her head – flails slightly over his new nickname, eyes wide behind his glasses. "Where are you from?"

He lives in Indianapolis, but is thinking about moving to the country in the hopes of expanding his business beyond the big city – but, he confesses to her, he had been hoping that 'the country' would be a little closer to home when his boss' boss' boss decided three steps up the food chain to send him to Derry, Maine of all places – and Karen's eyes light up at the thought of a whole different state. She's spent the last three years thinking all she has to do is get out of Derry, and now she is realising that she needs to get out of *Maine*.

Marriage is not something Karen had ever thought much about. Distantly, she remembers childhood fantasies of her and Nancy never growing old, staying in a small cabin by the quarry, skipping their stones and adventuring around for the rest of forever. She had certainly never thought she would end up in a wild, whirlwind wedding to a man she's known for five months, who came to her backwater town for two weeks and ended up permanently renting a room in the Derry Town House. They certainly don't love each other to the full extent people expect a married couple to do, but they are fond, and affectionate, and they both can feel that it is some pre-destined entity pulling them together for reasons that are, as of yet,

unclear. Karen's mother is beside herself – on one hand, she's ecstatic that her daughter has found someone and is getting married, but on the other, her daughter is eighteen and her husband is twenty five, and – “*Mom!*” Karen giggles, passing her mother a plate with a slice of cake and a dollop of cream on it, “Stop fretting, I'll be fine!”

They honeymoon in Bangor, because neither of them have ever been, and Karen moves into Ted's room in the Town House, only bringing two suitcases and her large collection of money tins, which Ted is thrilled to count through, handing her a slip of paper with the total written on it after several days. Karen doesn't even look at it, tucking it into the pocket of his button-up and kissing his cheek in thanks. She tells him she's pregnant the very next week.

*DERRY NEWS, SEPTEMBER 1967 After a severe storm, and the bursting of several sewer pipes, the quarry was damned briefly to prevent water damage. The remains of at least three unidentified children were discovered in the river bed...*

Nancy Wheeler is born the day the circus comes to town, three weeks early, on an unusually sunny October day in 1967. The big tent gets set up out by the Barrens, where there's plenty of room for the guilt-trimmed trailers and all the equipment. You can see the peak of it from the Hanlon's farm, Karen discovers, visiting Will and picking up some eggs from her friend. She spies the red and white striped fabric, and chills settle over her, automatically settling her free hand over the large swell of her abdomen, protecting her unborn child from... something. Will, worried, touches her shoulder gently and says that he also has some cuts of meat if she'd like to take those home too.

Arriving back in the Town House with a dozen eggs and lamb shanks for dinner, Karen is greeted by Ted, and two tickets to the circus. “I wasn't sure if you'd like to go,” he says quietly, fiddling with the paper tickets as Karen sets the food down in the kitchenette. They really should look at getting a house, especially with a baby about to make an appearance. “But I've never been to a circus, so I thought...”

"I'd love to go to the circus with you," Karen tells him firmly, grabbing his hands and smiling at him. Ted Wheeler might not be the man she ever imagined herself marrying, but he's currently doing an excellent job of exceeding all her expectations as a husband. She only hopes he's as good at being a father. "But no popcorn." She's not sure why she says it, but she knows that it's important.

"No popcorn," Ted agrees with an easy laugh, twirling her slowly so as not to knock off her centre of gravity.

Karen is actually enjoying the circus, sitting to Ted's left in the second-front row, completely enamoured with the gorgeous animals paraded before her – especially the panther, sleek and black and so wildly dangerous as it prowls around the ring – and absolutely hypnotised by the woman who walks the high-wire, and the man who swings from a trapeze twenty feet above them. She smiles at Ted's reactions to the knife-throwing act, a soft, barely-there gasp escaping his lips and his carefully schooled expression cracking just slightly around the edges with every blade thrown at the girl posed before the board.

As the knife-thrower is bowing for his applause, the hand of his unharmed assistant held aloft as she waves daintily for the crowd, a horrible, out-of-key honk sounds, and the claps raise in volume. Karen, confused, looks around and wonders what people are cheering for, while more of the horrible honks echo around the tent, somehow managing to make themselves obnoxiously heard over the din of the crowd.

Three clowns appear in the ring, one on a creaking unicycle, one in ridiculously over-sized shoes, and one dancing in by himself to an imaginary waltz. It's the third clown holding the air-horn, and he blasts it again as he halts his dance to acknowledge the crowd. Karen can feel her joy slipping away as if being sucked out with a straw, her skin crawling as she stares at the clowns fooling around. Beside her, Ted is chuckling in his mild, quiet way at their antics, and Karen wonders why she isn't having as much fun as everyone else is watching the clowns.

Halfway through the clowns' act, a fourth clown appears, dressed in silver silk and a bright red wig. He passes right by them, and Karen

swears he looks directly at her, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end and gooseflesh ripple across her arms. The clown is holding a bunch of balloons in each hand, in all the colours of the rainbow, and he starts handing them to all the kids in the front few rows, a genuine smile behind his painted on one at all their delighted faces. His eyes find Karen's again, bright blue even in their dark section of the tent, and he pulls another string from his hand. "Balloon, young miss?" he asks politely, holding one out for her.

Karen freezes and the whole world seems to stop around her as she looks up at the red balloon.

*"Where did those balloons come from? Have you been accepting things from strangers? -your ma will have a fit when she finds out."* Her mother's voice reaches her from the long-forgotten depths of her memories, and in that brief moment, when her eyes land on the round, red plastic reflecting the light of the man-powered spots above them off the frames of Ted's glasses, Karen remembers something she had buried so deep inside she had convinced herself she had imagined it. The ghostly memory of Nancy's severed hand, still attached to her red balloon, surfaces, and Karen looses a scream the likes of which have never left her throat since that fateful day in the summer of 1961, when two little girls had gone to skip rocks in the river of the quarry.

When Karen comes to – because she must have blacked out during her horrible trip down memory lane – she is lying in a hospital bed, very alone, very exhausted, and very not-pregnant. Panic settles over her, until she spots Ted passed out in a chair in the corner, a tiny bundle of cream-coloured blankets clutched to his chest. "Ted!" she calls, and he jolts awake, blinking at her dumbly for a few seconds before flying over to her. Well, maybe not flying. It feels, to Karen, like he flew, because she has several drugs running through her system and her vision is slightly blurry and a little like a projector slide at the moment. She reaches a shaky hand out to touch his face. "What happened?"

Ted gently explains to her that she had what the doctors are calling a 'panic attack' at the circus, inducing labour, and they had had to sedate her for fear of her hurting either herself, the baby, or the poor nurses looking after her, who had completely underestimated just

how much power was behind Karen's small fists. "They're waiting with the birth certificate downstairs," Ted whispers after giving Karen a few minutes to process all this new information. "I haven't named her yet."

"Nancy," Karen says automatically, before he has even finished speaking. "Her name is Nancy." How could she name her daughter anything else?

Ted beams at Karen, and it is, wonderfully, the liveliest expression she's ever seen on his face. It's almost enough to convince her she loves him, even for just that moment. As she holds her baby girl for the first time, all soft skin wrapped in soft blankets with soft brown eyes looking curiously out at the world, Karen can see her future all laid out before her like every Christmas dinner she's ever eaten – and, maybe, it looks a little bit like what she's been trying to run away from, a husband and a house and a child, but she finds that she really wouldn't mind that. As long as she can have it outside of Derry.

The clown doesn't cross her mind until she is being dismissed from the hospital later in the week. Her mother had sent her an 'It's A Girl!' present, complete with a giant and incredibly fluffy pink teddy bear, and a beautiful foil balloon with flowers and doves printed on the front, and Karen stares at it blankly as the nurse does one more check up on both her and Nancy, who has spent the first six days of her life in the arms of one of her parents at any given moment, sleeping, eating, and watching the world with her large eyes. Trying to picture the clown, his face, the balloon, his suit, to Karen is like trying to look through an uncleared window, so dirty that no matter how hard she wipes at it with the sleeves of her shirt, the dirt just keeps coating the glass until she can't see anything through it at all, and she gives up trying to remember, settling to be content with Ted's second-hand retelling of her episode in the circus tent.

She takes her daughter home, with plans to start relocating out of Derry, ready to start the next part of her life. She might legally be Mrs Karen Wheeler, but she is still young Karen Tozier at heart, and Karen Tozier will not let one half-forgotten circus clown stop her from living her life.

When Michael Wheeler – tiny little Mike with his pointed chin, freckled nose, and too-large eyes – is born just shy of Christmas Day in 1970, Karen and Ted are still living in Derry, although they've moved out of the Town House and into a beautiful, recently-built two-story house on Neibolt Street. Karen, who knows the layout and landmarks of Derry like the back of her hand, notes to Ted as they're signing the papers, that it's built over the oldest well in the town, and that she thinks they're going to have the best water pressure in all of Derry because the well is the centre of the entire sewer system. They argue for a few minutes over if that's how water pressure actually works, before Nancy cuts them off with an indignant declaration that, at three years old, she won't be sharing a room with her new little brother.

Ignoring the odd shiver that passes over her the first time she enters the house, Karen sets about making it a home.

Karen works less and less at the Town House now – she had withdrawn from her management position shortly after Nancy had been born, no longer needing the larger salary now that Ted was effectively overseeing the running of Derry's three banks, having left the original branch that sent him to Derry to manage himself independently – and she finds that she rather enjoys motherhood, playing with her children and working the house until it looks just how she had always pictured the house she would live in in her dreams. The walls are all soft cream wallpaper and warm wooden panels, the stairs are carpeted and there are earthy throw rugs on every floored surface, barring the kitchen, which is outfitted with terracotta tiles and tan grout. Upstairs, the rooms are airy, each one boasting a wide window with a gorgeous view. Sometimes, Karen likes to sit in the window box in the nursery, Mike balanced in her lap and Nancy at her feet, reading to them in the sunlight.

It takes just one year, twelve full months of seemingly unrelated incidents (*her favourite mug disappeared while she was stacking shelves with canned food in the basement, Nancy's white socks washed red, Ted's second best pair of shoes went dull and stayed dull, the screws in Mike's crib keep coming loose*) and occasional nightmares from the children, for Karen to understand the strange feeling constantly in her gut, although it takes a midnight trip into a whimpering Mike's room and

a sleepy stumble into a wall for her to truly feel it. She loses her footing on the rug in Mike's room after comforting the one year old back to sleep, and braces her hand against the wall by the door, her soft palm on the textured pattern of the wallpaper. Karen blinks at it in the dark, the few shafts of moonlight peeking through the curtain casting strange lights and shadows across the room. The paper under her fingers is greying, peeling up off the rotting plaster in cracking shards, flaking down onto her bare feet like ash.

"What?" Karen whispers to herself, brows creasing. The paper is only a year old, it definitely should not be peeling like that, and the plaster was fresh on when the house was built. She draws her hand away, plaster dust and gummy paper sticking to her fingers, and leans closer to get a better look, startling when she suddenly can't see anything amiss and her hands are clean. "What?" she repeats, and then convinces herself that she's asleep on her feet, smartly taking herself back to bed. Her chest feels tight as she tiptoes back up the hall, not wanting to wake Mike again or disturb Nancy, and when she sees the wallpaper rotting and peeling there too, she squeezes her eyes shut and ignores it.

She sleeps fitfully for the rest of the night, her dreams flickering behind her eyelids like the pages of an old coffee table book. A hazy green lake floods her senses, the water cool to the touch and smelling like summer, pulling her in, closing over her head deeper and deeper until she sees a small, pale hand reaching out to her from the depths, fingers crooked as if to say *come hither*. She's pulled out of the water through the mouth of a well and down into a dark and smoky circus ring from the peak of the tent, finding herself hanging from the trapeze by her knees, feeling giddy as she swings lazily, not even registering slipping off the wooden bar until the ground rushes up to meet her. The hard dirt gives way as her shoulders touch it, strangely spongey as she sinks into it, thick vines wrapping her up in cocoon as air filled with floating rot surrounds her. The vines pull away and she's standing on nothing, staring at a great, hulking shadow that is just out of focus at the edge of her vision. "*Karen...*" a voice whispers, resonating deep in her chest like it's been there as long as her heartbeat. "*Karen...*"

Her bedside alarm goes off, startling her awake so badly she almost

smacks Ted right off the mattress as he rolls over towards the sound.

Throughout the day, Karen reassures herself that the house looks normal, running her hands over the wallpaper periodically as if smoothing out imaginary bubbles. She has almost convinced herself that she is imagining it all – the peeling paper, the bubble in her stomach that feels like it's made of lead, the voice that is still calling her name through the fog of her dreams – and then she has to go down to the basement to retrieve some tinned tomatoes for lunch. Standing on her toes, she reaches up to the top shelf, and that's when she sees it out of the corner of her eye. The floorboards in the middle of the room are warped and swollen, starting to split in places, and there's an entire plank missing, apparently having fallen right through into the foundations. Not wanting to believe what she's seeing, Karen grabs her tomatoes and sprints up the stairs (*the hole and rot is gone when she goes back down after dinner, looking for that can of peaches she remembers seeing earlier in the day*) shooing a curious Mike away from the stairs.

Weeks go by without any further incident, and then months, and then Karen comes home from visiting Will Hanlon one day and she drops her eggs and the lamb roast Will gave her for dinner on the kitchen tiles when she walks in and sees her fridge rusted over, her tiles all shattered, and her countertops covered in a thin layer of dust and mold. The short scream she lets out has Mike and Nancy running from where they'd been half-fighting over and half-sharing a book in the living room, and the children cling to Karen's legs as they try not to step in the mess of smashed egg and leaking lamb blood. Karen's eyes flash down to brush their fringes off their faces, and when she looks back up, the kitchen is clean and pristine again.

"Karen," Ted says to her on Christmas Eve, 1975. They have been living on Neibolt Street for five years now, and Karen thinks she might be going insane, convinced that her periodic *hallucinations* of the house decaying around them is the product of that traumatic summer when she was thirteen years old, but too proud (*and self-conscious*) to admit to that out loud. "I'm worried about Mike," Ted continues, resuming filling Nancy's red stocking with small wrapped presents. Over said years, their marriage has stayed the only constant in their lives, neither stagnating into resentment nor increasing in

intensity. The love they share is friendly, and familial for their children.

Humming thoughtfully, Karen tapes down a stray flap of tissue paper on the last of Mike's stocking gifts before looking up at her husband. "Why?" She eyes off the final present she has to wrap – a soft brown teddy bear with golden glass eyes for her brand new little nephew, Wentworth and Maggie having married the previous winter, and their little son Richard making his appearance just a few months ago. "Has something happened to him?"

Ted adjusts his glasses thoughtfully, sitting back on his heels with his hands braced against the shagpile rug at the foot of the couch. "Have you noticed that he never brings any friends home?" he says after a few seconds of carefully chewing his words before voicing them. "I know he's in the younger end of his class, but still. Don't you think it's strange that a boy as friendly and curious as our son doesn't seem to have friends?" Karen, who only ever had one friend as a child, and then only two as a teenager, all of whom still live in Derry and stay in regular contact with her, merely offers a shrug to Ted's thoughts, not quite relating to his worries.

They don't discuss it any further, but Karen does bring it up to Mike when she's packing his lunch to send him back to school for the first day of second term of kindergarten. "Michael, you know you can have friends stay over, if you want," she reminds him with a small smile, ruffling his soft hair off his freckly face. Though Nancy had inherited the Tozier curls, already wild about her face at eight, Mike had Ted's neat, straight hair, sitting flush to his rounded cheeks and tiny ears.

Mike shrugs, almost mirroring her actions from Christmas Eve. "They don't like the street," he mumbles quietly, shuffling the new sneakers from his Uncle Went and Aunt Maggie on the tiles, his Big Bird backpack looking huge and bulky on his slim shoulders, bunching his sweater around the straps. "All the kids at school think it's creepy, and none of them will come down here." His voice sounds a little thick, and when he looks up at her, there are tears swimming in his dark eyes. Karen can't believe she never noticed how upset her son was about the matter, so wrapped up in her own problems she had failed to realise her son's. "Marcia Fadden says her dad says that it's a

bad street where bad things happen, and he won't let her come within a block of it."

"That's just silly," Karen replies automatically, internally blanching at the fact that she sounds just like her own mother. She stoops down to wipe the few tears that have spilled over his eyelashes off Mike's cheeks, kissing his forehead softly. "I have lived in this town all my life, and I have never heard anything like that about this street."

"What about the foot?" Mike asks so softly it's less than a whisper, less than the whisper of a whisper, and Karen almost doesn't hear him – wouldn't have heard him if his little face wasn't so close to her ear. Karen starts, her hands frozen over Mike's back pack. "Mom? Peter Gordon told me that someone found a foot on this street. Is that true?" Mike wiggles out of his mother's arms when she doesn't reply, looking up at her curiously with a tiny frown creasing his brows underneath his fringe. He looks not unlike an owl, his face out of proportion with his features the way all children are, his head cocked to the side as he waits for an answer. "Mom?"

Karen moves robotically as she pats Mike's back and stands up again, turning him around so she can slip his sandwich and a few snacks into his back pack, so caught up in what her son had asked she doesn't realise she hasn't replied until he tugs on the hem of her blouse, a small pout on his face at what he perceives as being ignored. "Sorry, sweetie," Karen manages to laugh in a practiced, off-handed manner, learned from many years in customer service. She is just a little ashamed to be using the tactic on her son. "Now, it's time for school. I'll come and pick you up at the end of the day, wait for me by the flagpole, okay?" She smiles and kisses his cheek, herding Mike towards the door where Nancy is impatiently waiting for them, all smarted up in her new pleated skirt and hand-knitted cardigan. Mike's '*but mom!*' falls on deaf ears as Karen ushers them outside to where Ted is waiting in the car for them. "Off you go!"

She waits on the porch to wave them goodbye until the car disappears down Route 2, the sun waking up her latest home-improvement endeavour – two large beds of sunflowers on either side of the front path, with a small swing set near the porch for Mike to play on – the yellow blooms turning their large heads to drink up the rays. Karen bites her lip, Mike's quiet, innocent question ringing in

her ears as her eyes involuntarily stray to the edge of the property, where a slat and lattice fence separates the Wheeler's house from their neighbours' house. Karen remembers old Mrs Wagner, the Jewish lady who had lived in that house Karen's entire life until she passed away from a shock-induced heart attack, how she had sat in her rocking chair on her front step, keeping a careful eye on the children that sometimes played in the lot with the well that became the very house where Karen now lives. Karen remembers the day in 1962 when Mrs Wagner found the foot, ripped off and bitten bloody, on the edge of what is now Karen's flowerbed.

Suddenly feeling a little faint, nausea broiling in her stomach, Karen turns on her heel to head back into the house. The door is cracked, the wood rotting away, hanging off its hinges with the windows boarded over. Inside, the walls are grimy and the air is full of dust and cobwebs. Blank-faced, Karen walks through her rotting house, ignoring the hallucination until it goes away. As she sits in her favourite armchair, stubbornly not looking at the moth-bitten fabric and the moldy stuffing leaking out of it, Karen thinks of Mike's teary face, so upset that no one will come to his house because of the street's scary reputation. Perhaps a move is in order. Not just out of the street. Out of the town. Out of the *state*.

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The final straw for Karen comes on a Wednesday – arguably the worst day of the week, even when your house isn't being haunted by some ancient metaphysical being that is potentially the root of all your childhood trauma, not that Karen Wheeler was aware of that fact at the time – in the middle of May, in 1976. It happens on a day when the weather can't decide if it wants to rain and flood them all inside all week, or beat sun down on them so intensely the damn roads start to steam, leaving Derry alternatively blanketed by thick smog, and washed out by fat bouts of water. Mike and Nancy are playing marbles in the basement because it has the smoothest floors and is the only place in the whole house untouched by the unbearable heat of the sun, the occasional shriek letting Karen know that they're having the time of their lives, and Karen is making a batch of iced tea in the kitchen, one pitcher for the kids, and one for Ted when he gets home from work.

Just as she's adding the lemon slices, ready to put the jugs in the fridge, Karen hears a snapping noise, and a high, thin scream echoes from the basement, scared and full of pain. "Nancy?" Karen calls out, turning slowly to face the door. "Nancy, was that you?"

"Mom!" Mike yells back. "Mom, Nancy's hurt!"

Karen doesn't even slip in the tea as the jug in her hands crashes to the floor, the glass shattering on the tiles as she fairly sprints for the basement stairs. It's like *déjà vu*, time seeming to grind to a standstill as Karen throws the door open and dashes down the stairs. She sees Mike on his hands and knees, marbles scattered all around him, tears rolling down his red cheeks as he peers earnestly down into a giant, gaping hole in the middle of the floor, the wood blackened and split and rotten. Karen grabs him around the waist and whips him away from it like something is going to crawl out and take him – or drag him inside. "Where's Nancy?" she barks, panic clouding her tone. Mike shakes his head and points to the hole. "Stay here, okay, Michael?" Karen murmurs, hugging him tightly before setting him on the floor near the wall. She combs his hair back for a moment, steeling herself, and then turns and approaches the hole.

Nancy's short pants and whimpers are coming out of the hole in the floor. "Mommy?" she whispers. "It's dark down here."

Careful of the unstable wood, Karen kneels down at the edge of the hole and peers inside. Initially, all she can see is Nancy, sprawled awkwardly on the ground a few feet below her, looking a little dazed and with a cut high on her cheekbone, but otherwise unharmed. "What happened, Nancy?" Karen asks softly, trying to distract Nancy as she works out a way to pull her daughter out. Nancy starts haltingly describing how she'd chased after a stray tom bowler when the floor had turned wet and slippery and then fallen out from underneath her, and Karen spots a pile of old, neatly stacked bricks right by Nancy's feet. "That must have been really scary," Karen says sincerely, knowing she would be a lot more shaken up than Nancy if that had happened to her. "Can you see those bricks, Nancy? Can you climb up on there so I can lift you out?"

It's not until Nancy is precariously balanced on the top row of bricks that Karen realises that the pile is more than a simple pile of brick.

She traces it with her eyes, the round top of the old Derry well, the bricks worn smooth from years of water pouring down it, and the mortar now powdery from years of disuse. Karen leans further forwards to grab Nancy's hands, and she feels like an inch further and she'll fall right down into the well. She can't tear her eyes away from its black depths. Down, down, down it goes. A silly line from *The Hobbit* wiggles its way into her mind (*Down, down, down in Goblin Town*) and, for Nancy's sake, she represses the hysterical laugh that wants to accompany it, helping Nancy loop her arms around her mother's neck. Karen puts her own arms around Nancy's waist and starts to lift the little girl out of the hole, and she accidentally looks back down the well.

Orange lights are dancing at the bottom of it.

(*Pound, pound, far underground. Down, down, down in Goblin Town*)

When Ted arrives home, he enters the kitchen to find a sticky mess of tea and lemon wedges coating the tiles, interspersed with glittering shards of wicked glass. One of their high-backed dining room chairs is firmly wedged under the handle of the basement door, a throw rug off the couch stuffed in the gap between door and floor. Karen is huddled against the refrigerator, Mike held protectively in her lap and Nancy pressed in tightly to her side, all three of them eyeing off the basement door like something is going to burst through it and attack them. "What's... going on?" he asks hesitantly, unsure if the three of them are playing some strange game, or if something has actually happened.

"The floor," Karen breathes, her hands white-knuckled in Mike's hair and on Nancy's shoulder. "Nancy fell through the floor." She turns her head ever so slightly to look intensely at Ted. "The well is still down there."

Now more than slightly worried about his wife's mental stability, Ted Wheeler removes the throw and the chair – despite the shrieked protests from the rest of his family – and descends the basement stairs. He breaks out in gooseflesh before he reaches the bottom step, each creak under his feet making the beating of his heart a little more frantic. Sweat beads on his temples, causing his glasses to slide down his nose slightly. A cold chill settles over him as he rounds the corner

into the main room, reaching up to adjust the frames so he can see properly. From Karen's hysteria, he's half expecting some kind of fantastical monster to be slathering away in the corner. He sucks in a breath and flicks the light on.

The basement is completely empty. Not one single can, shelf, or floorboard out of place.

"Karen," Ted says, suddenly back in the kitchen, and Karen jumps, almost tipping little Mike onto the floor. He clings to her, face buried in her neck as his thin shoulders shake, and Nancy reaches over to grab her little brother's hands with her own trembling ones. Ted notes the cut on Nancy's cheek, poorly wiped and oozing almost-congealed blood down her pale skin. "What the hell happened? There's nothing down in the basement except a mess of marbles."

It's too much for Karen. She sets Mike down and cries into her hands. Ted quietly escorts the kids into the living room, wiping Nancy's cheek properly and giving her a small bandaid, and making sure they're safely wrapped in a blanket before returning to Karen, who has given up on her hands and is just sobbing openly into the air, her feet kicking out like a tantruming child. "*I can't take it anymore!*" she screams eventually, and Ted stoops down to kneel beside her, carefully out of the way of her flailing hands. "*This house is driving me insane!*"

When he's afraid she might hurt herself, choke on her own sobs or knock herself out with her hands, Ted gently-firmly-hesitantly grabs her wrists and holds her arms still in her lap. "It's okay," he says, voice level. "You're just tired. I've noticed you haven't been sleeping late-"

"NO!" Karen yells, trying to shove him off. "NO! IT'S THIS DAMNED HOUSE, AND THAT DAMNED WELL, AND THAT FUCKING THING IN THE BASEMENT!" Ted wisely refrains from reiterating that there is nothing in the basement. "I need to get out of this house," Karen's voice drops so dramatically in volume it gives Ted whiplash. "I need to get out – we need to get out of this house before *it* comes back, we need to leave *Derry*, we need to leave *Maine*, leave the whole damned country if it will keep them safe!" She sucks in a harsh breath, glassy eyes lighting up like she's had an epiphany. "It's coming back."

“What is coming back?” Ted falls over backwards comically as Karen suddenly shoots to her feet. “Karen?”

Karen clutches at his arms, looking up at him imploringly. “Just trust me, Ted. We *have* to leave.” She shakes her head. “When we’re gone, I’ll explain everything to you, I promise.”

They hold eye contact for a long time, communicating silently, neither quite willing to back down, until Ted seems to deflate with a subdued nod. “Okay. Alright, we’ll leave. Wherever you want to go.”

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The map of the United States is the only thing the Wheelers leave behind in Neibolt Street, spread out on the empty lounge room floor, the four corners held down with canned beans and a bag of marbles. Karen Wheeler has laid it out the night the basement floor collapsed, and they walked past it every day as they hurriedly packed the house and started organising transfers and moves and paperwork and all the other things involved in moving a family out of a town. She still doesn’t know where they’re going, hoping that she’ll pass the map and the correct answer will jump out at her.

On the day they finish packing, Mike is helping her wrap the last of their breakables, his small hands nimbly wrapping glass ornaments and porcelain teacups from Karen’s mother in newspaper and depositing them in a box full of packing peanuts. He turns the small glass turtle over in his hands while Karen deconstructs another newspaper for him, worried he’ll cut himself on the staples. Big brown eyes wide, Mike marvels at the way the light in the room passes through the shell, cut flat on top and stained a faint green, its polished surface reflecting his face back at him. Karen, also distracted by the glint of the glass pricks her finger on the scissors she’s prying the staples open with, and swears loudly.

Startled, Mike’s hands twitch, and the turtle rolls off his palm, landing on the map shell-side down with its little glass feet in the air. He scrambles over to make sure it hasn’t broken, and Karen pats his back soothingly at the distressed look on his face. She reaches down to pick it up when something catches her eye.

The turtle has landed over Indiana, the cut of the glass magnifying the place names.

“Hawkins,” Karen says, trance-like, fingers hovering over the turtle (yes, *the voice in her head whispers, Hawkins*) before she picks it up.

They leave the map, forgotten on the floor as the car and moving trucks are packed. Ted, now so prolific in his business that he can *make a few calls* finds a house in Hawkins the next day, perfectly in their price range. There’s even a management position available in the bank there, and they’re eager to welcome him aboard! It’s so convenient Karen almost questions it. Almost.

On the thirtieth of May, 1976, Karen Tozier crosses the Derry boarder for the first time in her life, in a nice car, surrounded by her family and fresh hopes for the future. As they drive away from Neibolt Street, Karen turns her head and watches with hollow eyes as her beautiful house ages and rots before her eyes. Eighteen hours later, Karen Wheeler crosses the border into Hawkins, Indiana, and – like the blink of an eye – she forgets.

She forgets everything.

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*1976, New York State. In the middle of the night, two families meet, their cars parked side-by-side in the back lot of a near-empty gas station. They do not know it, but the place that each family is leaving, is the end destination of the other. Out of one car, sleek and silver and full to bursting with children and belongings, steps the Wheeler family, Ted stretching and heading for the rest room without a word, while Karen fusses intently over the two tired and grumpy children stumbling out of the back seat. The Uris family creeps out of their own car, small and black and unassuming with blank plates, Andrea holding her sleeping son in both arms and sharing a wary look with Donald as the man carefully locks the car up, both turning wide eyes to the road, now half-hidden from sight by the bulk of the gas station.*

*Karen, standing by the bonnet of the Wheelers’ car and trying fruitlessly to get her youngest child to have a drink of water – “Mom, no, I’m not thirsty.” “Come on, Michael, just a few sips, it’s hot in the car!” – spies*

*Andrea, who is balancing son, handbag, and some kind of paperwork across two hands, any one of those things liable to fall to the ground with one badly-timed shift of her feet on the loose gravel. The paperwork goes first, typed documents and glossy photos starting to slide from their manila confines as the little boy in Andrea's arms stirs from his nap with an unhappy grumble and kicking feet, and Karen takes a dive for them, water bottle rolling away somewhere as she catches the papers, trying her best not to crumple them. She can't help but catch a few words, 'laboratory closed', 'genetic experiments', and 'kidnapped children' being just a few, but it's like her eyes slide right over them, her brain refusing to register them. She's been feeling that a lot since they left (where did they leave?) their old town.*

*"Oh, thank you," Andrea says, ever so quietly, as Karen tucks the papers back into the folder still clutched in her hand. By this point, her son is done being held, squirming properly in her arms, much to the threat of her handbag and newly reacquired papers. "Alright, Stanley, alright," Andrea says placatingly, setting him down on the ground. "Goodness," she breathes, looking at Karen a little mortified. "He's not usually so... active."*

*Karen offers the other mother a wry grin, as if to say, 'Look what I have to deal with!' and glances over to where Mike is now arguing with his sister about something in a high, whiney tone, while Nancy pushes him away with several huffs and an eyeroll. "It's perfectly alright, children will get that way cramped in a car – he's lucky he doesn't have an older sister to rile him up even further." The laugh Andrea gives in response sounds a little forced, a little like Karen hit too close to home, and she anxiously smooths back the fine golden curls on top of Stanley's small head. He barely reaches her knee, can't be any more than two years old, but has eyes that look ancient, staring out of his baby face with a wisdom that shouldn't be possessed by a ninety year old, let alone a toddler. "Does Stanley want to play with Michael for a little while, while we have a cup of tea? I saw they have a twenty-four hour coffee station in the shop front next to a children's play area, and I think we both deserve a cup or two."*

*"I..." Andrea trails off with a nervous swallow, checking the road over her shoulder again. She sees Donald and Ted a little way away from them, close to the gas station, shaking hands and talking amiably the way men always seem to do when they want to put off doing something, and then*

*she sees little Stanley beside her, his face turned curiously to the still-bickering Wheeler siblings, an air of missing about him. “I think Stanley would like that,” she croaks out after a pause, bending down to talk to her son eye-to-eye. “Stanley, do you want to go and play?” she asks him, never having to worry about talking baby to her child, for reasons that make her sick to her stomach and guilty as all hell.*

*Stanley considers this offer, and then nods his head, solemn face breaking into a tiny smile. “Yes,” is all he says.*

*“Well, come and meet Michael, then,” Karen says kindly, walking back towards her own children. Andrea follows close behind with one hand on Stanley’s shoulder, just in case. “Mike, Nancy, stop flicking each other for thirty seconds, I beg of you,” Karen is fondly berating her children. “Michael, this is Stanley.” She gestures to the small boy. “Me and his mommy are going to have a cup of tea up there in the gas station, could you come with us and keep him company?” Mike doesn’t exactly look thrilled at the prospect of playing with a boy at least four years his junior, but it’s better than sitting in the car with Nancy, who is sulking behind the driver’s seat with a book in her lap. He nods, and Karen swoops down to kiss his cheek. “Good boy, now follow me.” And she starts leading the way past the husbands to the gas station.*

*As the two women settle onto the high stools beside the coffee bar with their freshly made polystyrene cups of tea, exchanging a quick, “I’m Karen,” and, “I’m Andrea,” before settling into the motherly routine of effectively talking smack about their homes, husbands, and children, Mike levels a critical eye on Stanley as the two boys explore the children’s play area.*

*It was probably designed with younger children, like Stanley, in mind, full of big, soft foam blocks, and several stuffed toys, but Mike unearths a small pile of colouring books and a box of stubby pencils in the back of the plastic-penned area. Much to his surprise, Stanley toddles over and sits beside him, spying a book full of birds and tugging it out of the stack. “Stan,” he whispers, voice soft and hardly childlike, looking up at Mike with big blue eyes as he reaches for a grey pencil. “Call me... Stan.” The word sounds foreign in his mouth, like he isn’t used to being called that. Mike doesn’t understand how a two year old could be used to being called anything much, but he is quickly working out that Stanley – Stan – possibly isn’t the average two year old.*

*"I'm Mike," he replies, selecting a book of cartoon dragons and a soft blue pencil. "Are you okay? You look a little sick."*

*Stanley bobs his head a few times, tongue poking out in concentration as he carefully shades the wing of a small bird. "Been driving for a long time," he says, voice still not raising above a whisper, almost like he can't use it properly. "Was in a hospital, bad things happened." Mike's eyes trail over the big, scary white bandage wound from Stan's left wrist all the way up to the crook of his elbow, and feels that he doesn't need to ask any further questions on the matter.*

*"Oh," Mike murmurs instead, not knowing what else to do other than reaching out and patting Stan's back gently, because that's what he always sees his mother do when someone is sad. "I'm sorry."*

*Their conversation falls flat after that, the two boys colouring in silence for several minutes. Eventually, they inevitably reach for the same orangey-red pencil, and their hands bump, Mike's hand looking strangely large beside Stan's small, chubby fingers. Mike doesn't think anything of the accidental touch, taking the pencil with a shrug when Stan's hand stays frozen where it had touches Mikes. On the other hand, Stan jumps at the brushing of skin, his blue eyes snapping open unnervingly wide as he stares blankly at nothing for several seconds before shaking his head, curls flying everywhere.*

*Hesitantly, he touches Mike's shoulder to get the older boy's attention. "Mike," he says, still at that same, controlled volume, but there is a commanding tonal quality to the single word that has Mike dropping his pencil and staring at the young child beside him. "Mike," Stan says again. "Swings." He says the one, single word, and no more follow for such a long time that Mike huffs and makes to turn back to his colouring – he's going to call the dragon D'Artagnan, like the hero in his favourite picture book, because D'Artagnan is a very sensible name for a mysterious creature from another land – but Stan's hand suddenly shoots out and grabs Mike's wrist. His lips are pressed together, small noises slipping out like he's fighting himself to speak. "Swings," Stan says again, a little edgier than before. "You go play on swings," he continues, haltingly. His eyes lock onto Mike's, bright blue on deep brown. "Promise?"*

*"Wh-what swings?" Mike asks, startled. There are no swings anywhere near them, and he doubts he'll have any in the garden like he did back in.*

*Back in. Back in where? In his old house, but where, exactly, had that been?*

*Stan grabs Mike's hand firmly. "Promise?"*

*"I promise!" exclaims Mike, worried that if he doesn't, the boy before him might explode. "I promise I'll play on the swings." Stan smiles, appeased, and turns back to colouring his bird like nothing happened at all. Mike doesn't know then just how important those words would eventually become to him, 'promise' and 'swings', or how much of his future he had just cemented in place.*

*Twenty minutes later, Andrea appears beside the pen, lifting Stan out with her hands under his armpits even as his complains and wriggles. "Come on, Stanley. We have to get back on the road." She seems a little panicked, frazzled around the edges, and Stan immediately stops fighting against her hold, intelligent face understanding. "Say goodbye to Michael."*

*"Bye, Mike," Stan bleats obediently, and then Andrea is carrying him away. "See you at the quarry, don't be late!" he calls out to the other boy, almost as an afterthought, and Andrea stifles a small scream, clapping a hand over her son's mouth and all but sprinting out of the gas station.*

*It's such a strange thing to say, no context or apparent meaning, that Mike ponders it very seriously for the three minutes it takes for Karen to come and collect him too, tossing her used cup in a trash can on her way past. "Did you have fun with Stanley, Michael?" she asks him sweetly, taking his hand and starting to lead him back to the car.*

*"Mom, what's the quarry?" Mike asks in lieu of an answer.*

*Karen halts in her tracks, her mouth hanging slack and her eyes unfocused slightly, like she's remembering something. "There was a quarry in the town I grew up in, and -" she falls silent for a second before shaking her head with a self-deprecating smile. "Goodness, I completely forgot what I was going to say. What was your question, honey?"*

*Mike shakes his head. "Never mind."*

*See you at the quarry, don't be late!*

*“Don’t be late for what?” Mike mutters to himself as he climbs into the car, making a big show of scrambling over Nancy’s lap until she’s shrieking and swatting at him with her book irritably. “Don’t be late for what?”*

*“What are you babbling about, dummy?” Nancy asks, not meanly, just in the condescending tone all sisters have saved in reserve especially for use on their younger brothers.*

*“Nothing,” Mike says, buckling his seat belt and pulling a comic book out of the pocket in the back of Karen’s seat. “Something dumb.”*

*“Not surprising,” Nancy sniffs, turning her page and going back to reading.*

*It’s an eighteen hour drive to Hawkins from wherever they had left (even Ted can’t remember where they had left, and he’s holding the map) and Mike sleeps for the last few hours, waking up to see the ‘Welcome to Hawkins’ sign as they drive past it. The car pulls up outside a huge two-story house, and Mike’s eyes nearly fall out of his head he’s so excited.*

*He has forgotten all about Stanley and his strange words by the time he goes to bed that night, and he won’t be reminded of them again until he’s standing by the swings on his first day at his new school, trying to work up the courage to ask a pretty little boy if Mike can play on the swings too.*

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

OOOOH 013 FINALLY REVEALED!! Seriously, I was gonna drag it out until like... the second last chapter, but everyone and their mother guessed that it was Stan, so... here's your reveal! There's no date set for the release of the next chapter (Chapter Three: Welcome to Derry) because there's been some shit happening at work and I don't have time to write much of anything at the moment, BUT it will go straight into some of Stan's story :D Thanks so much for reading, don't forget to leave a comment down below, or come talk to me on tumblr!!

**Author's Note:**

Thanks for reading! A reminder that updates will happen every 12-ish days unless otherwise stated! Please leave a comment down below to let me know what you think (and to motivate faster updates) and don't forget to kudos/bookmark. Come talk to me on Tumblr [here](#).